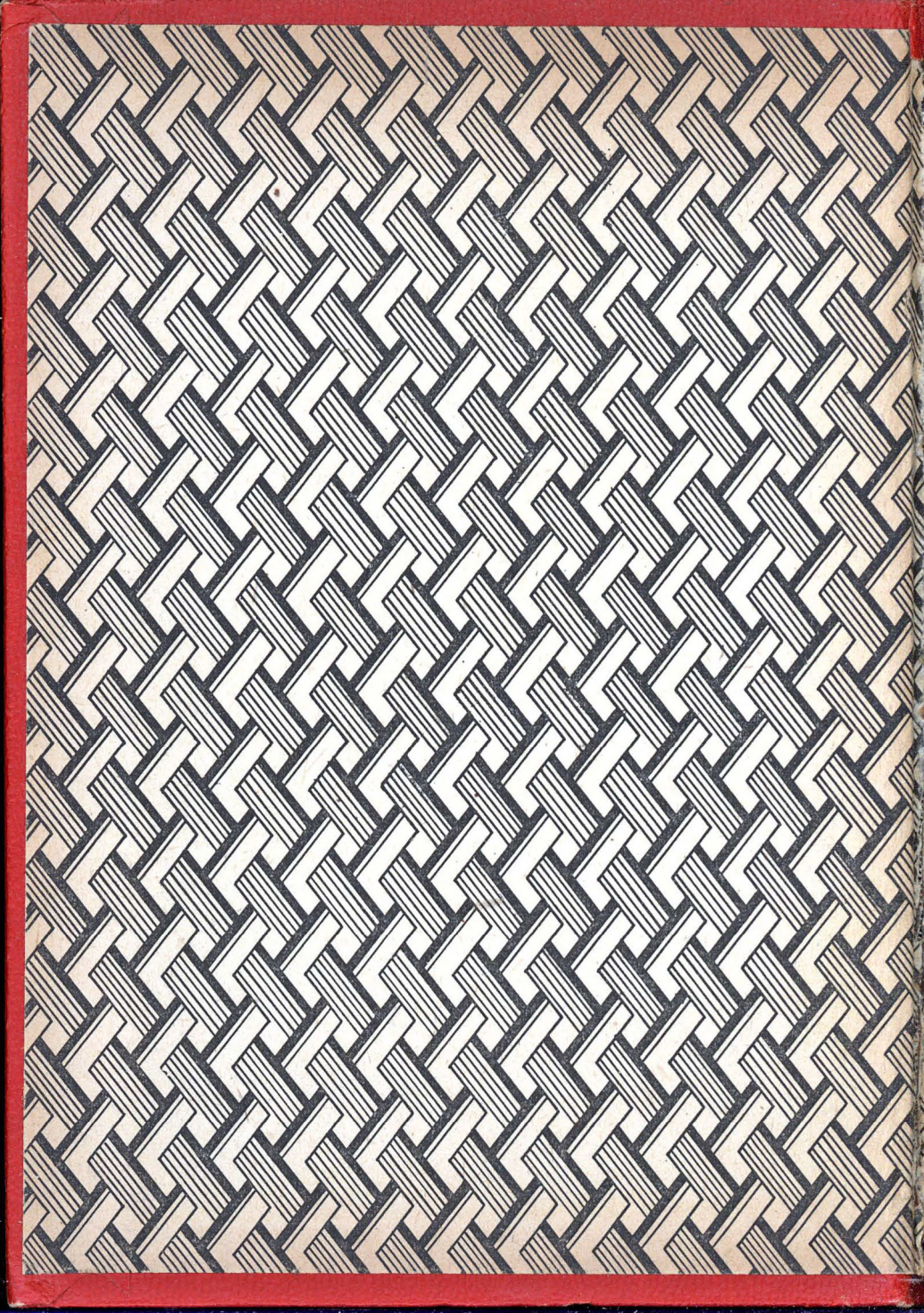
Whispering WALLS

MILDRED A. WIRT



Whispering Walls

By

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MILDRED A. WIRT MYSTERY STORIES

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MYSTERY STORIES

TALE OF THE WITCH DOLL
THE VANISHING HOUSEBOAT
DANGER AT THE DRAWBRIDGE
BEHIND THE GREEN DOOR
CLUE OF THE SILKEN LADDER
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HOOFBEATS ON THE TURNPIKE
VOICE FROM THE CAVE
GUILT OF THE BRASS THIEVES
SIGNAL IN THE DARK
WHISPERING WALLS

Other Titles in Preparation

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Whispering Walls

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CHAPTER

1

THE PLUMED SERPENT

SMOOTHLY AND with accurate aim, the slim girl in blue sweater and swinging skirt sent the heavy ball crashing down the polished floor of the bowling alley.

"Another strike, Penny!" cried her school companion, Louise Sidell, watching the tenpins topple helter skelter and vanish out of sight. "You're certainly going like a house afire today!"

"Lucky, that's all." Penny Parker's friendly grin widened as she chalked up the score. Brushing aside a sandy-gold lock of hair which had dropped over one eye, she suddenly squinted at the wall clock. "Ten minutes until four o'clock!" she exclaimed. "Lou, unless we call it a day, I'll be late for work!"

"You and your work!" scoffed Louise, but she quickly sat down to remove her bowling shoes. "Why spend all your spare time at that old newspaper?"

"The *Riverview Star* is the best daily in the city!"

Penny shot back proudly. "Anyway, I like being a reporter."

"I'll give you no argument on that point, my pet. You love it! Especially poking that freckled little nose of yours into every big story or mystery that comes along! Confess now, isn't it the excitement you like, rather than the work?"

A twitch of Penny's lips acknowledged the truth of her chum's observation. Off and on for several years she had served in many capacities on the *Star*, a daily Riverview newspaper owned by her father, Anthony Parker.

Many of the publication's best stories had carried her name. Now that school had started again, she was unable to work full time, but on this particular Saturday afternoon she had promised Editor DeWitt she would report at two o'clock. She had no intention of being late.

"Let's go," she urged, picking up her coat.

Louise trailed Penny to a desk where the cashier was absently listening to a short wave radio. As they paid their bill, the instrument suddenly blared a police order:

"Patrol 34—First National Bank, Main and Front Streets. Repeating, First National Bank, Main and Front Streets. See complainant. Patrol 34 in service."

To Louise it was only a meaningless jumble of words but Penny instantly pricked up her ears.

"Front and Main is just around the corner! Maybe there's been a robbery, Lou!"

"I hope not," laughed Louise. "The First National's where I keep my money. All $28.50 of it!"

Sweeping her change from the counter, Penny glanced again at the clock and came to a quick decision. Doubtless, the *Star* office would send a reporter to check the police call, but considerable time might elapse before anyone reached the bank.

"Let's jog over there and see what's doing," she proposed.

Louise nodded, hastily pulling a tight-fitting hat over her dark curls. Penny was already out of the door, walking so fast that her chum was hard pressed to overtake her.

Rounding the corner at Main and Front Streets, the girls were just in time to see a patrol car park at the curb in front of the bank. A police sergeant was at the wheel, but before Penny could hail him, he and a companion vanished into the building. A third man posted himself at the door of the bank.

Penny walked over to him. "Anything doing?" she inquired in a friendly, off-hand way. "A robbery?"

"I wouldn't know," he replied curtly.

Fishing in a cluttered purse, Penny came up with a press card. "I'm from the *Star*," she added, waving her credentials before him.

"You'll have to talk to the sergeant if you want to get any information," he said, relaxing slightly. "Go on in, if you want to."

Louise kept close to Penny's side as they started into the bank. But the policeman brought her up short by saying: "Just a minute, sister. Where's your card?"

"She's with me," said Penny with careless assurance.

"So I see," observed the patrolman dryly. "She can't go in without a card."

Argument was useless. Decidedly crestfallen, Louise retreated to wait, while Penny went on into the darkened building. Curtains had been drawn in the big marble-floored bank, and the place appeared deserted. Teller cages were locked and empty, for the bank had closed to the public at noon.

Pausing, Penny heard the faint and distant hum of voices. She glanced upward to a second story gallery devoted to offices, and saw two policemen talking to a third man who leaned against the iron railing.

"Apparently this is no robbery," Penny thought, taking the marble steps two at a time. "Wonder what has happened?"

Breathlessly, she reached the top of the stairs. A short, thin man with glasses and a noticeably nervous manner stood talking to the two policemen. The sergeant, his back to Penny, started taking down notes.

"I'm Sergeant Gray," the policeman said. "What's your name?"

"Albert Potts," the man replied.

"A clerk here?"

"Secretary to Mr. Hamilton Rhett, the bank president. I called the police because a situation has developed which worries me. This afternoon I talked to Mrs. Rhett who gave me no satisfaction whatsoever. I said to myself, 'Albert Potts, this is a case for the police.' But there must be no publicity."

"What's wrong?" Sergeant Gray asked impatiently.

"Mr. Rhett has disappeared. Exactly nine days ago at three o'clock he put on his hat, walked out of the bank and hasn't been seen since."

Here indeed was news! Mr. Rhett was socially prominent and a very wealthy banker. His disappearance would be certain to create a sensation in Riverview.

"So Mr. Rhett walked out of here nine days ago," Sergeant Gray commented. "Why wasn't it reported earlier to the police?"

"Because at first we thought nothing of it. If you will excuse me for saying so, Mr. Rhett never has taken his bank duties very seriously. He comes and goes very much as he pleases. Some days he fails to show up until afternoon. On several occasions he has been absent for a week at a time."

"Then why does it seem so unusual now?"

"Yesterday I telephoned Mrs. Rhett. She said she had no idea what has become of her husband. I suggested notifying the police, but she discouraged it. In fact, she hung up the receiver while I was talking to her. Altogether, she acted in a most peculiar manner."

"That was yesterday, you say?"

"Yes, I told myself, 'Albert Potts, if Mrs. Rhett isn't worried about her husband's absence, it's none of your business.' I should have dismissed the matter thereupon, except that today I learned about the missing bonds."

"Missing bonds?" inquired the sergeant alertly. "Go on."

"Mr. Rhett handles securities for various trust funds. At the time of his disappearance, $250,000 in negotiable government bonds were in his possession."

"You're suggesting robbery?"

"I don't know what to think. Mr. Rhett should have returned the securities to our vault in the basement. I assumed he had done so, until this morning in making a thorough check, I learned not a single bond had been turned in. I can only conclude that Mr. Rhett had them in his portfolio when he walked out of the bank."

"So you decided to notify the police?"

"Exactly. It was my duty. Understand I wish to

bring no embarrassment to Mrs. Rhett or to cast reflection upon my employer but—"

Albert Potts broke off, his gaze focusing upon Penny who had edged closer.

"Now who are you?" he demanded suspiciously.

Stepping forward, Penny introduced herself as a *Star* reporter.

"You have no business here!" the secretary snapped. "If you overheard what I just said, you're not to print a line of it! Mrs. Rhett would never approve."

"I did hear what you told Sergeant Gray," replied Penny with dignity. "However, any report to the police is a matter of public record. It is for our editor to decide whether or not to use the story."

Behind thick glasses, Mr. Potts' watery eyes glinted angrily. He appeared on the verge of ordering the girl from the bank, but with an obvious effort regained control of his temper, and said curtly:

"If you must write a story, mind you keep the facts straight. Mr. Rhett hasn't been seen in nine days and that's all I know. He may return tomorrow. He may never appear."

"Then you believe he's been kidnapped?" Penny asked.

"I don't know. There's been no ransom demand."

"Perhaps he absconded with the $250,000 in bonds."

"Don't quote me as making such a statement even if it should prove true! Mr. Rhett is a wealthy man—

or rather, he acquired a fortune when he married a rich widow who set him up here as bank president. But don't quote me on that either!" he exclaimed as Penny jotted down a few notes. "Leave my name out of it entirely!"

"Let's have a look at Mr. Rhett's office," proposed Sergeant Gray.

"Follow me, please."

His poise regained, Albert Potts led the way down the gallery to a large, spacious office room. On the polished mahogany desk rested a picture of an attractive woman in her early forties whom Penny guessed to be Mrs. Rhett. A door opened from the office into a directors' room, and another onto a narrow outdoor balcony overlooking Front Street.

Sergeant Gray and the patrolman made a thorough inspection of the two rooms and Mr. Rhett's desk.

"When last I saw the bonds, Mr. Rhett had them in the top drawer," the secretary volunteered eagerly. "He should have returned them to the vault, but he failed to do so. Now they're gone."

"Then you examined the desk?"

"Oh, yes, I considered it my duty."

While Penny remained in the background, Sergeant Gray asked Mr. Potts a number of questions about the bank president's habits, and particularly his recent visitors. The secretary, whose fund of information seemed inexhaustible, had ready answers

at the tip of his tongue. He even produced a memo pad upon which the names of several persons had been written.

"These were Mr. Rhett's visitors on his last day here," he explained. "So far as I know, all were business acquaintances."

Writing down the names for future checking, Sergeant Gray inquired if Mr. Rhett had disagreed with any of the callers.

"A quarrel, you mean?" Mr. Potts hesitated, then answered with reluctance. "Only with his wife."

"Mrs. Rhett came to the bank the day your employer last was seen?"

"Yes, they were to have had lunch together. She came late and they quarreled about Mr. Rhett's work here in the bank. Finally she went away alone."

"You heard the conversation between them?"

"Well, no," Albert Potts said quickly. "Naturally I tried not to listen, but I did hear some of it."

"Mrs. Rhett may be able to explain her husband's absence," commented Sergeant Gray.

"She refused me any information when I telephoned. That was one reason I decided to notify the police. The loss of $250,000 could be very embarrassing to the bank."

"Who owns the bonds?"

"They belong to the Fred Harrington estate, 2756 Brightdale Avenue. If they aren't produced soon,

there will be trouble. I've worked here for 15 years. You don't think anyone could possibly blame me, do you?"

The sergeant gave him a quick glance, but made no reply as he reexamined the mahogany desk. Finding nothing of interest, he slammed the top drawer shut.

From the back of the desk, a piece of paper fluttered to the floor, almost at Penny's feet. Evidently it had jarred from the rear side of an overflowing drawer, or had been held between desk and plaster wall.

Without thinking, Penny stooped to retrieve the sheet. She glanced at it carelessly, and then with a shock of surprise, really studied it. Drawn across the center of the paper in black and red ink was a crude but sinister-looking winged serpent.

Raising her eyes, Penny saw Albert Potts' cold gaze upon her. Was it imagination or did his shriveled face mirror fear?

"What have you there?" he demanded.

Penny gave the paper to Sergeant Gray. Mr. Potts moved quickly forward, to peer over the man's shoulder.

"A plumed serpent!" he exclaimed.

"And read the words beneath it," directed Penny.

Under the drawing in a cramped hand, had been scribbled: "*This shall be the end.*"

CHAPTER

2

AN UNEXPLAINED DISAPPEARANCE

SERGEANT GRAY studied the strange drawing for a moment and then said to Albert Potts: "Can you explain the meaning of this picture? And the words written beneath it?"

For the first time since the start of the interview, the bank secretary seemed at a loss for words. Finally he stammered: "Why, no—I've never seen the drawing before. I don't know how it got into Mr. Rhett's desk."

"You seemed to recognize the picture," interposed Penny. "At least you called it a plumed serpent."

"It is the symbol of an ancient cult, or at least that is what I take it to be. I've seen similar drawings in library books."

"And the writing beneath it?" probed the sergeant.

"I am not sure," the secretary murmured, ill at ease. "It slightly resembles Mr. Rhett's writing."

"You say you can't explain how the paper came to be in Mr. Rhett's desk?"

"My employer's private life is none of my concern."

"What do you mean—his private life?"

"Well, I hadn't intended to tell you this," Potts said unwillingly. "The truth is, Mr. Rhett was a strange man. He had queer interests and hobbies. I have been told he collects weird trophies of ancient cults."

"Then this drawing probably has a connection with your employer's hobby?"

"I wouldn't know," shrugged Potts. "If it weren't for the handwriting, I might think someone had sent a warning to him. As it is, I'm completely in the dark."

"Mr. Rhett had enemies?"

"He was a ruthless man and many persons disliked him. His friends were queer too. He preferred low class persons to people of culture and refinement. Why, only two days before his disappearance, he deliberately kept one of our largest stockholders waiting an hour while he chatted with a building porter! It was very humiliating! I had to tell Mrs. Biggs he was in conference, but I think she suspected the truth."

"Do you have a photograph of Mr. Rhett?" the sergeant asked.

"I deeply regret I haven't. For that matter, I never have seen a picture of him."

"But you can describe the man?"

"Oh, yes. He is forty-five, though he looks older. His hair is gray at the temples. He wore an expensive

tailored suit—brown, I believe. One of the most distinguishing marks I should say, is a scar on his left cheek."

"I'll send one of the detectives around," Sergeant Gray promised. He had completed his investigation and with the other patrolman, started to leave the office.

Albert Potts drew a deep breath and seemed to relax. Only then did it occur to Penny that throughout the greater part of the interview he had stood in front of the outside balcony door, as if to shield it from attention.

Taking the plumed serpent drawing with them, Sergeant Gray and the patrolman left the office. Penny lingered, intending to ask Albert Potts a few questions about Mr. Rhett. But the man gave her no opportunity.

Barely had the others gone when he turned toward her, making no effort to mask his dislike.

"Now will you get out of here?" he demanded.

His tone annoyed Penny, and perversely made her determined to take her time in leaving. Deliberately she sidled over to the balcony door.

"Where does this lead?" she inquired.

"Outside."

Penny opened the door, but Potts immediately barred the way.

"There's nothing there except a balcony! Just get out of this office so I can lock up and go home! I've had a hard day, and you're making it worse!"

For a reason she could not have explained, Penny felt a deep urge to annoy the nervous little man further. Ignoring his protests, she pushed past him out onto the balcony.

Guarded by a high iron railing and fence, it extended for perhaps fifty feet along several offices. At each end, projecting from the sloping slate roof, was a grotesque decorative gargoyle.

"You see!" rasped Potts. "There's nothing here. Now are you satisfied?"

The gargoyle near the door had drawn Penny's attention. Its carved stone body angled out from the building, terminating in a horned animal head with massive open jaws.

"Will it bite?" Grinning impishly at Potts she started to thrust an arm between the stone teeth.

To her astonishment, he suddenly seized her and gave her a hard shove through the doorway into Mr. Rhett's office. She resisted and he immediately released her. But he locked the balcony door.

"You're driving me crazy!" he cried furiously. "Now get out of here! Unless you do—"

Potts was such a ridiculous little fellow that Penny could not be afraid of him. However, she decided that her joke had been carried a trifle too far.

"Okay, I'm going," she muttered. "Thanks for all your courtesy."

"Mind you print only the truth in your paper," Potts hurled after her as she went out the door. "If you don't, you may have a lawsuit on your hands!"

Penny reached the street to find that the police car had gone and Louise was nowhere to be seen. Deciding that her chum had grown tired of waiting, she hastened to a nearby drugstore to telephone the *Star* office.

Editor DeWitt answered, and Penny gave him the story straight and fast.

"Hamilton Rhett, the banker!" he exclaimed. "Sure you got the name right?"

"Positive!"

"This is apt to be a big story, especially if the man was kidnapped or walked off with the bonds! Grab a taxi and run out to the Rhett estate. Get all the dope you can from Mrs. Rhett, and don't forget pictures! We'll want one of Rhett. Better take all she has of him to keep the *Times* from getting them! Got that straight?"

"I think so."

"Okay, go right to town on the old gal and learn everything you can about her quarrel with Rhett! I'll send a photographer out there as soon as I can round one up."

Penny felt a trifle weak as she hung up the receiver.

Editor DeWitt took it for granted she would bring in a bang-up story when she returned to the newspaper office. But from what she had learned of Mrs. Rhett, she surmised that an interview might not be granted willingly.

Looking up the address of the Rhett estate, Penny hailed a passing taxi. As the cab sped along the winding river boulevard, she speculated upon how best to approach Mrs. Rhett.

"I wish I were more experienced as a reporter," she thought, nervously examining her pocketbook to be certain she had paper and pencil. "Something tells me this story will be hard to get."

The only daughter of a distinguished newspaper owner and publisher, Penny considered herself an essential part of the *Star* office. Even as a youngster in pigtails, she had haunted the big noisy newsroom, pecking at the typewriters and making a pest of herself.

From her father, Editor DeWitt, Jerry Livingston, a star reporter, and the printers who adored her, the alert girl had gleaned much useful information. But there were yawning gaps in her newspaper experience. No one realized it better than she.

Gazing thoughtfully toward the river, Penny recalled the first story she ever had written, carried in the paper under the title, "Tale of the Witch Doll." Another yarn, "The Vanishing Houseboat," also had

been bannered across the front page of the *Star*, but in acquiring that story Penny and Jerry had nearly lost their lives.

Slight wonder that Mrs. Maud Weems, the Parker housekeeper, was reluctant to see the girl she loved so dearly take up a journalistic career. Sadly she declared that Penny's nose for news and mystery would lead her into serious trouble. Mr. Parker, however, did not worry. "Penny has good horse sense," he said. "And she was born with printer's ink in her blood stream!"

The taxi stopped with a jerk in front of a large red brick mansion. Large acreage was enclosed by a wooden rail fence flanked by tall untrimmed bushes.

"Shall I wait?" inquired the cab driver as Penny alighted.

She shook her head, started to pay him, then thought of a better idea. "Charge this to the *Star*," she instructed.

The cab driver looked a trifle worried as if he were fearful of losing the fare, so Penny flashed her press card again. It worked like magic.

"Okay, a charge it is," he agreed. He shifted gears and drove away.

No sooner had Penny dismissed the cab than she regretted it. Although she expected to catch a ride with the *Star* photographer back to the paper, the mansion had a deserted look. As she walked up the

gravel path, she noticed that many of the shades were drawn.

"There's no one here," she thought. "I've wasted my time coming."

Nevertheless, Penny walked on to the front door to ring the doorbell. Instead she found a brass knocker in the shape of an ugly carved face. She stared at it a moment, then let it fall against the brass plate.

As Penny had feared, no one came to admit her. She was turning away in defeat, when she fancied she saw a shade move in one of the upstairs rooms. Encouraged, she knocked again.

Still there was no answer, but distinctly she saw the curtain flutter. Stepping back a pace, she gazed upward.

A dark face was visible in a circular window of one of the tower rooms. For a moment appraising eyes focused upon her. Then the curtain jerked convulsively, and the man was gone.

CHAPTER

3

A THATCHED ROOF COTTAGE

SATISFIED THAT the house was not deserted, Penny hammered harder on the massive oaken door with the brass knocker. Still no one came to admit her.

"Someone is here," she thought, intensely annoyed. "Well, if he can be stubborn, so can I! I'll make such a nuisance of myself, they'll have to let me in."

She hammered steadily with the knocker for a half minute, then she experimented with pattern knocks, in interesting combinations of dots and dashes.

Suddenly, the window above her head flew open, and the same dark-faced man peered angrily down at her.

"What you want?" he demanded in an unpleasant voice.

"Why, I should like to see Mrs. Rhett," Penny replied politely. "She's here, isn't she?"

"Maybe she is, maybe she isn't," was the sharp retort. "Who are you?"

Resenting the man's unfriendly attitude, Penny nevertheless answered that she was from the *Riverview Star* and desired to interview Mrs. Rhett about her missing husband.

"Madam not seeing anyone. Go 'way now!"

The window slammed shut.

Convinced that the man, evidently a servant, had acted upon instructions from Mrs. Rhett, Penny wondered what to do. She considered returning to the *Star* office to explain to Editor DeWitt.

But in Mr. DeWitt's dictionary there was no such word as failure. He would cock an eyebrow at her, growl: "So you couldn't get in, eh?" and promptly send a more aggressive reporter to the mansion.

"I could force my way in, but that's trespassing," she reflected with deepening gloom. "If I were thrown into jail, Mr. DeWitt probably wouldn't even bother to bail me out! He'd say I didn't use my head in an emergency."

Penny decided to wait for the *Star* photographer, who also had been sent out. In a tight pinch, photographers nearly always could come up with a picture. Between them they might think of a means of getting into the mansion.

"I hope Salt Sommers is sent here," she thought. "He's a good scout. "He'll help me get the story."

Penny glanced hopefully toward the highway, but

the press car was not to be seen. With a sigh, she slowly circled the house.

The building, no longer new, once had been one of Riverview's finest homes. Now the red brick exterior had become discolored, and trees and bushes disclosed lack of skilled care. A hedge flanking the walk had been trimmed unevenly. The lawn was badly mowed, with many weeds going to seed.

Nevertheless, the estate was impressive, and Penny walked along a sloping path to a pool of water lilies. Seating herself on the cement rim, she dabbled her hand in the water. A moment later, raising her eyes, she caught a flash of color at one of the mansion windows.

"I'm being watched," she thought. "Perhaps if I poke around here long enough, Mrs. Rhett will decide to see me."

However, there was no further movement at the window, and presently Penny wandered around to the rear of the house. Two interesting architectural features drew her attention. At each side of the house were circular tower rooms, each with two tiny round windows which resembled human eyes.

From the rear of the mansion, several paths led in diverse directions. One, which was weed-choked, apparently angled toward the river beach. Years before, when the Heights Yacht Club had been in oper-

ation, many sailboats plied the waters at this particular point.

Now, except for an occasional fisherman, few boats ever came so far upstream. As the once fine neighborhood had deteriorated, householders gradually had moved away. Penny judged that the Rhetts, isolated from their neighbors, probably were the only socially prominent people remaining.

Selecting a path which led away from the river, deeper into the grounds, Penny presently found herself some distance from the road and the boundary fences.

Hedging the cinder trail were high, untrimmed bushes which completely screened her view. After walking a short distance, she paused, uncertain whether to keep on or return to the road.

"This exploration isn't helping me get a story," she reflected. "If the *Star* photographer should come while I'm here, I might miss him."

However, the trail had a fascination for Penny and she was reluctant to turn back. In a tiny clearing a short distance ahead, she saw what appeared to be a thatched roof cottage. Only a moment or two would be required to investigate it, she thought. Then she would return to the road to await the photographer.

As Penny started eagerly on, she stubbed the toe of her shoe on a stone, and nearly tripped. By quick footwork, she saved herself a fall, but as she paused

to recover breath, she plainly saw the bushes at the left hand side of the trail move convulsively. Only a slight breeze had rippled the tree leaves.

Penny was certain that someone stood behind the bush, watching her movements.

"Probably it's that dark skinned man who called to me from the window," she thought.

The knowledge that she was a trespasser on the Rhett property made Penny slightly uneasy. Likewise, it was unnerving to know that her every move was being watched. Admitting to herself that she should turn back, she nevertheless kept on down the path.

Without appearing to do so, she kept her eyes on the bushes at the left hand side of the trail. Now and then a slight jerk of the foliage convinced her that the one who watched was following and keeping pace with her.

Penny hastened her steps as she moved through a cool, densely shaded woodland. Frost had tinted many of the leaves with red and gold, but the arresting beauty of the foliage was completely lost upon her. She was only aware of those soft footsteps behind her.

Then unexpectedly, Penny came to the clearing. Scarcely seventy-five yards ahead, stood the thatched roof cottage which had attracted her interest from afar.

So quaint was the building that for a moment she gave it her entire attention, forgetting the one who watched from the bushes.

From where she stood, the cottage appeared to be about the size of a large room, and resembled a native hut. No windows were visible. The door was closed, and across it was painted in black and red a symbol which even from afar could be distinguished as a serpent-like figure.

The cottage fascinated Penny. At first glance she assumed it to be a large playhouse, but the serpent painting convinced her the building never had been intended for use of children.

A garden or tool house perhaps? She dismissed the thought as quickly as it came. Into her mind flashed a recollection of the drawing that had fallen from Mr. Rhett's desk in the First National Bank. The paper had borne a plumed serpent, apparently a counterpart of the painting on the door of the thatched roof cottage!

Forgetful of the person who crouched in the bushes, Penny started eagerly forward, intending to examine the strange drawing at close range. Something whizzed past her, to embed itself in a tree trunk six inches from her head.

Brought up short, she saw that it was an arrow which had narrowly missed her. Had it been shot

from the bushes behind her, and by the person who had stealthily followed her along the trail?

In cold fury, Penny jerked the arrow from the tree. Only then did she notice a folded sheet of notebook paper attached to it with a bit of string.

She broke the knot and freed the paper. Across its crumbled face had been penciled a message. The lead had smeared and the words were hard to read. But she made them out.

The warning note said: "Do not approach the thatched roof cottage. To do so is to endanger your life."

CHAPTER

4

BEHIND THE BUSHES

HAVING READ the warning message, Penny whirled around to gaze toward the bushes on the left side of the path. All now was still, with not the slightest movement of leaves to reveal the presence of the one who had shot the arrow.

"It's that man who talked so unpleasantly to me from the mansion window!" she thought. "Why, he might have struck me with the arrow! I'll put an end to his target practice!"

Acting impulsively, she made a sudden dive for the bushes, jerking them apart to expose the one who had followed her. No one was there.

The grass, however, was trampled, and some distance away, she heard a scurry of footsteps.

"Trying to get away!" she thought grimly. "Not if I can prevent it! I'll have it out with him and learn why he's warning me my life is endangered!"

The footsteps fast were dying away. Listening intently, Penny decided that the person who had shot

the arrow was stealing through the bushes toward the river path.

Seeking the intersection of the two paths, the girl stole noiselessly down the cindered trail sloping toward the beach. She had guessed correctly. In a moment she heard an agitation in the bushes nearby and knew that the person she sought was struggling through a tangle of underbrush.

Soon the bushes parted and a thin girl in blue shirt and slacks stepped out onto the cindered path. In one hand she carried an Indian bow with a quiver of arrows, while with the other, she brushed dry leaves from her long, dark hair.

Having expected to see a man, Penny was startled. As she opened her lips to speak, the girl saw her and was brought up short. She gasped in dismay, turned, and with astonishing speed darted down the path leading to the beach.

"Wait!" called Penny.

Keeping her face down, the girl raced on.

Determining that she should not escape without an explanation, Penny gave chase. The runner had an excellent start, but on coming to a series of wooden steps, her heel caught in a small hole. Down she went, and before she could arise, Penny had overtaken her.

Observing that the fall had not injured the girl, she said sternly:

"Now little Miss Robin Hood, will you kindly ex-

plain why you tried to exterminate me with that arrow?"

Sitting up, the girl ruefully rubbed an ankle and gazed at Penny with hostile brown eyes.

"Don't be ridiculous!" she retorted. "I had no intention of hitting you. My aim is perfect."

"Modest, at any rate," observed Penny, smiling despite a determination to appear very stern. "You did write the warning note?"

"Naturally."

"Why, may I ask?"

"Because in the first place, you have no business being on our property. Secondly, I didn't want you to go to the thatched roof cottage."

"May I ask your name?"

"I'm Lorinda Rhett."

"Hamilton Rhett's daughter!"

"Stepdaughter," the girl corrected.

"You're just the person I want to see!" exclaimed Penny, overjoyed at her good fortune. "Your stepfather—"

"I'll answer no questions about him," the girl interrupted. "You may as well spare your breath. Mother and I want no reporters here."

"So you know who I am?"

"How could one help knowing? You nearly broke our door down with your pounding, and I heard you talking to Antón."

"Your servant?"

"My stepfather's," Lorinda corrected with a slight inflection which suggested that she did not entirely approve of Antón. "Now will you stop asking questions and go away?"

"All in good time. First, I'm relieved to know that the thatched cottage isn't really dangerous. You only wrote that to be rid of me."

Lorinda gave her a long, steady look but said not a word.

"Or perhaps there is some mystery about the cottage," Penny went on. "After all, your stepfather's disappearance was very queer. But the police, no doubt, will get at the bottom of it when they come here."

Lorinda scrambled to her feet. "The police!" she gasped. "We'll not have them here prying around!"

"Whether or not you like it, I'm afraid you will have the police on your doorstep. A man of Mr. Rhett's prominence can't disappear without a few questions being asked."

Lorinda lost much of her defiance. "But this is our own private affair," she protested. "My stepfather will return—at least, I think he will."

"And the missing bonds?"

"Missing bonds?"

"Didn't Albert Potts, the bank secretary, inform your mother that $250,000 in negotiable securities also had disappeared?"

"Why, no! At least I knew nothing of it! Surely

you don't think my stepfather would stoop to the theft of bank securities?"

"I have no opinion in the matter. I'm merely here to get the true story. For some reason you and your mother have been unwilling to cooperate."

Lorinda did not reply, but seemed to be thinking deeply.

"Do you have any idea where your stepfather is now?" Penny inquired, hoping that a direct approach might glean information.

"No, of course not."

"You haven't seen him for the past ten days?"

"That is true," Lorinda acknowledged with great reluctance. "But it's not so unusual. My stepfather frequently goes away on trips."

"Without telling anyone where he is going?"

"I'll not answer that question," Lorinda said with a proud uptilt of her chin.

"I'm afraid you don't like reporters very well," observed Penny pleasantly. "Nor do you seem especially fond of your stepfather."

"That's not true! I do like my stepfather. Why, he was the one who taught me how to shoot with a bow and arrow! He gave me this bow which is a valuable collector's item!"

She offered it to Penny who inspected the fine workmanship with keen interest.

"Mr. Rhett is a collector?" she inquired.

"Yes, he's traveled all over the world, but most of his time was spent in the jungles of Africa, Brazil, and other places in South America. That was before he married mother, of course."

"Your stepfather was especially interested in ancient religious cults?"

"He made a study of it, and for a year gathered material by living in the jungle." Lorinda suddenly broke off, aware that she was warming to Penny and telling her entirely too much.

"Then it was your father who built the thatched roof cottage?"

"Please, let's not talk about it," Lorinda pleaded. "I don't like to be unfriendly or impolite, but you must understand there are things I can't tell you, and which must never be published."

Taking the ancient bow from Penny's hand, the girl started up the path, limping a trifle on her twisted ankle.

"Only one more question, Lorinda. Please tell me the truth. Why were you afraid to have me investigate the thatched roof cottage?"

The girl paused on the path, gazing at Penny quite pathetically.

"Don't ask me to tell you any more," she whispered. "The cottage is a place of evil omen. Truly, I did you a favor in warning you away."

"I saw a painting on the door—that of a winged or

plumed serpent. Will you explain its significance?"

"I only know that my stepfather had it painted there when the cottage was built soon after his marriage to my mother. It is a symbol of one of the ancient cults he studied. Many of his trophies bear the same picture."

The information was a little disappointing to Penny. "Then I suppose the drawing that the police found in Mr. Rhett's office had no great significance," she remarked.

"Drawing?"

Penny described the serpent picture which had been found, adding: "On the sheet were written the words: 'This shall be the end.' "

"You are certain?"

"Oh, yes, I saw the paper myself."

Lorinda was visibly disturbed. "I must see that writing! It may mean—" she broke off and amended: "Tell me, where is the paper now?"

"The police have it."

"Oh!"

"Why do you seem to fear the police?" inquired Penny curiously.

"I am not afraid of them—certainly not. It's just that mother and I prefer to keep our lives private. Facts can be so easily misinterpreted."

"Your reluctance to assist the police also can be misinterpreted," said Penny. "For instance, it seems

strange to me that your stepfather's disappearance doesn't seem to disturb you."

"Oh, it does! It's only—well, there are things I can't tell you without my mother's permission. My stepfather is queer. Mother and I never liked his interest in weird cult practices. He had so many strange acquaintances and ties with the past. We always were afraid something dreadful might happen."

"Then he may have met foul play?"

"I don't know what to think," Lorinda said miserably. "A ten-day disappearance is not so serious. My stepfather occasionally went away before without telling us, though never for such a long period. If it weren't for the paper found in his desk, and the missing bonds, I would say it's much ado about nothing."

"As it is—?"

"The loss of $250,000 could be a very serious matter. Tell me, what is your name?"

"Penny Parker."

"You're here only to get a story for your paper?"

"That was why I came, but since meeting you I truthfully can say I also am very much interested in helping you if possible."

"I like you," Lorinda declared with a quick smile. "I'm sorry about the arrow. And I was very rude."

"Not at all. I deliberately egged you on, hoping

you would tell me about your stepfather. I was sent here to get a picture of him, and I hate to fail."

"A picture? Mother has one, but I doubt that she would permit you to use it." Lorinda considered a moment, then added: "Tell you what! I'll take you to her, and perhaps, if you're a convincing talker, she'll agree to your request."

"Oh, Lorinda, that's fine!"

The Rhett girl linked arms with Penny as they trudged up the path to the house.

"Don't count your chickens just yet," she warned. "Mother doesn't like reporters. It will be sheer luck if she gives you the picture or any information you can use in the paper."

CHAPTER

5

AN EVIL CHARM

"MOTHER HAS disliked reporters ever since she married my stepfather, two years ago," Lorinda confided as the girls approached the house. "We were in the Eastern part of the country at the time, and papers played up the story, suggesting that Mr. Rhett was a fortune hunter."

"Then he had no money of his own?"

"Not a great deal. You see, my stepfather loved travel, and until he met Mother he never really settled down. He made a little by writing magazine articles, and he spent it roving about the country and exploring far corners of the world."

"It must have been an interesting life," Penny commented politely. "Your mother enjoyed travel too?"

"Oh, mercy no! One hardly can get her away from Riverview. She and my stepfather never traveled together after they were married."

Penny gathered that Mr. and Mrs. Rhett were entirely different types of individuals, but she asked no

additional questions, for by this time, the girls had reached the house.

Crossing a stone terrace at the rear of the dwelling, they entered a spacious living room furnished with elegant though formal furniture. Shades were partially drawn, giving the interior a gloomy atmosphere, despite the vases of brightly colored chrysanthemums which decorated the tables.

A woman with dark hair tinged with gray sat reading a book. She was immaculately groomed, every curl of an elaborate hair-do in place, but her face lacked tranquility. Her eyes were not on the page before her, Penny noted, and as the two girls came in, she visibly started.

"Oh, it's you, Lorinda," she murmured in relief. "I declare, I am getting jumpy! For a moment I thought it might be the police or that inquisitive reporter—"

"Mother," interposed Lorinda hastily, "allow me to present Penny Parker, from the *Riverview Star.*"

Mrs. Rhett laid aside the book and stared at Penny, her face without expression. Her voice was cold as she spoke.

"From the *Star?* Lorinda, I am *very* sorry, but you know my feeling in this matter."

"Penny really is very nice, Mother," Lorinda said, flashing her companion an encouraging smile. "She didn't want to come out here and question us about

father, but the editor sent her. He wants a picture, too."

Mrs. Rhett arose to terminate an interview which had never really begun. "I am sorry," she repeated with emphasis. "There are to be no pictures taken."

"The editor especially wanted a photograph of your husband," Penny said. "By publishing it in the paper, it may be easier to trace him."

"Miss Parker," replied Mrs. Rhett pleasantly but with no warmth, "if I need assistance in locating my husband I shall request it. Meanwhile, I do wish people would not concern themselves with our affairs."

"Mother, we may not be able to avoid publicity," Lorinda rushed on. "There's likely to be a scandal. You see, $250,000 in negotiable bonds disappeared from the bank."

For a moment, Mrs. Rhett did not speak. A dagger-type paper cutter lay on the polished table beside her. Nervously her fingers closed upon it, and unaware of the act, she jabbed the sharp point several times through a lace doily centerpiece.

"Mother, you're ruining that!"

Mrs. Rhett dropped the paper cutter, which clattered on the table and tumbled to the floor. Without picking it up, she moved restlessly to the window, only to return.

"What were you saying about $250,000 in bonds,

Lorinda?" she asked. "Surely you didn't mean—"

"I only know what Penny told me. Soon after Father disappeared, Albert Potts discovered the bonds also were missing."

"There can be no connection. Why, even the suggestion that my husband would steal is ridiculous! It's preposterous!"

"No one has accused your husband," Penny said quietly. "Perhaps the bonds will be found. Now that the police have stepped into the case, there should be developments."

"The police," repeated Mrs. Rhett with a shiver. "Oh, dear, must we suffer their interference!"

A telephone in an adjoining room rang and Lorinda started to answer it. But her mother signalled to her.

"Let it go, Lorinda. It may be the police now, or another reporter. We'll have nothing to say."

The telephone rang again. Footsteps were heard down a hallway and a well-built, dark-skinned houseworker of midde age padded into the room. She gazed with intent curiosity at Penny as she started toward the library to answer the phone.

"No, let it ring, Celeste," Mrs. Rhett directed. "And if anyone comes to the door asking for me, remember, I am not at home."

"Yes'm," mumbled the housekeeper. She bent to pick up the paper cutter from the floor and as she did so an object which was tied about her neck with a

cord and kept hidden beneath her starched uniform, swung into view.

Penny obtained only a fleeting glimpse of the curious article, for the woman hastily thrust it into her dress front again. However, it appeared to be a tiny packet of cloth.

Lorinda also had observed the object. Fixing the woman with a stern gaze she said: "Celeste, you're wearing one of those heathenish *ouange* charms again! You promised Mother you wouldn't!"

"This only keeps away bad sickness," the woman retorted, with a slight accent which nevertheless made her words hard to understand. "A good *ouange*. Now that my master is away, you are not to tell me what to do."

"Lorinda, don't plague her," Mrs. Rhett said wearily. "We have enough trouble as it is. Let her wear the charm, or a dozen of them, if it gives her any satisfaction."

Lorinda subsided into injured silence, while Celeste flashed a triumphant smile.

Mrs. Rhett turned again to Penny. In a tone which could be interpreted only as a final dismissal she said: "I am sorry, Miss Parker, that I cannot help you. At present I do not know my husband's whereabouts or why he went away. If you will excuse me now, I shall go to my room for a rest."

With dignity she crossed the living room to a hand-

some circular stairway with a railing of polished mahogany. Her head held proudly, she presented a regal figure as she slowly climbed the steps.

But half way up, she suddenly halted, her body jerking taut. Uttering a low cry which was almost a scream, she stared at an object lying on the step in front of her.

"Why, Mother! What's wrong?" cried Lorinda.

With Penny and Celeste, she hastened to the staircase. Mrs. Rhett's face was as colorless as if she had seen a ghost. Her lips trembled. Without speaking, she pointed to the stair carpet.

There at her feet lay two burnt match ends tied together with a bit of scarlet string.

"An *ouange!* An evil *ouange!*" whispered Celeste in horror.

Lorinda turned upon her angrily.

"Celeste, don't say such things! You know how nervous Mother is, and how easily she becomes upset! If this is one of your charms—"

"No! No!" the woman protested. She stared fixedly at the object on the floor. "This charm is not mine and it is not Antón's!"

"Then how did it get here?"

"I do not know. It is a sign of evil—a sign of death."

"Superstition!" exclaimed Lorinda.

Mrs. Rhett started on up the stairs, but as she would have stepped over the burned matches, Celeste seized her by the skirt, pulling her backwards. Frightened, the woman screamed and fell heavily against the wall.

Celeste kept her from collapsing, all the while muttering words Penny could not understand.

"Stop that gibberish!" Lorinda commanded.

Mrs. Rhett broke away from Celeste, and with an hysterical cry, moved down the stairway and into the library. Though she closed the door behind her, the girls could hear her sobs.

"Now see what you've done!" Lorinda accused Celeste.

The woman paid no attention to her. Bending over the match sticks, she swayed back and forth as she muttered a strange chant. As Lorinda sought to pick up the charm, Celeste struck her wrist a sharp blow.

"Fool!" she exclaimed. "Would you let your mother die a slow and painful death? Do not touch this thing of evil until I have finished! If she had stepped over it, nothing would have saved her."

Celeste kept on with her mutterings until at last she was through. "I have done all I can," she said with a deep sigh. Gingerly she picked up the match ends and, dropping them into the living room fireplace, saw them consumed by flame.

"Now what is all this stupidity about Mother dying

a slow death?" Lorinda demanded sternly. "How did that thing get into this house, and what does it mean?"

"How it came here I do not know," replied the woman. "Its meaning is simple. In the jungles such symbols are sometimes placed on new graves, that the departing spirit may kindle a little fire and warm its cold hands in the other world."

"That's enough!" interrupted Lorinda. "Don't tell me any more. It's all so silly."

"It is the truth."

"Well, true or false, Mother is not to be told such nonsense. She's upset enough as it is."

"Your mother already knows," said the housekeeper. "That is why she weeps. She fears that even now the spell is upon her."

"Celeste, you must be out of your mind!" Lorinda cried in exasperation. "You never said such dreadful things or acted like this when Father was here. What has taken possession of you?"

"I fear for the family. It bodes ill that my master should remain away. If only the Zudi drum were out of the house—destroyed—"

Lorinda's patience had been overtaxed. "The Zudi drum!" she cried. "Oh, Celeste, you're impossible! Go find Antón and if you must, talk such nonsense to him! But not another word of it before us! Do you understand?"

Celeste stood facing the two girls defiantly. Her

eyes burned with an angry fire, and Penny expected her to make a bitter retort to Lorinda. Instead, she seemed to withdraw into herself, and with downcast head, scurried toward the kitchen.

CHAPTER

6

MATCHES AND STRING

AFTER CELESTE had gone, Lorinda went quickly to the library. Speaking soothingly to her mother, she urged her to go upstairs and lie down.

"That dreadful thing on the steps!" Mrs. Rhett exclaimed with a shudder. "Celeste jerked me back to keep me from walking past it, didn't she? The charm has an evil significance—perhaps that I shall have a long lingering illness or die."

"You know better than that, Mother. It's all superstitious rot! What ever gave you such an idea?"

"Why, I don't really know, Lorinda. I suppose Hamilton told me about the charm long ago. When I saw it on the step it gave me a deep shock and I seemed to realize that it had been put there for me alone to find. Lorinda, what if it should be a native death charm?"

"Mother, I won't allow you to even think of such foolishness! You're just upset because Father isn't here."

"Yes, that must be it," Mrs. Rhett declared with a heavy sigh. "I have such a headache. I'll go to my room now and try to sleep."

Lorinda took her arm and helped her up the stairway. As they came to the step where the burnt matches had been, Mrs. Rhett glanced down and shivered. Then she laughed apologetically.

"It really is silly of me to let a little thing upset me so," she declared. "I'll be myself again as soon as I have slept."

After helping her mother into bed, Lorinda returned to the living room where Penny had waited.

"I do hope you won't put any of this in the paper," she began earnestly. "People wouldn't understand."

"I'm afraid I don't myself," said Penny. "For instance, what did Celeste mean when she spoke of the Zudi drum? And who is she anyhow?"

"Oh, I forgot to tell you! Celeste and her husband Antón, are a couple my stepfather brought to this country after spending a year studying ancient cult practices. Celeste befriended him, I believe, and helped him gain information about the tribesmen. Anyway, Father took a fancy to her, and persuaded the couple to come with him."

"That was before he married your mother?"

"Oh, yes. After the wedding, my stepfather was unwilling to let Celeste and Antón go, so Mother agreed that they might work here. Antón is a worth-

less servant. He allows the grounds to run down shamefully, and the only time he ever really works is when someone stands over him!"

"And Celeste?"

"Oh, she is a hard worker, but I confess I don't understand her," Lorinda replied. "We disliked each other on sight. In a way, I'm a little afraid of her."

"Why?"

"I can't explain." Lorinda stirred restlessly. "She makes me feel uneasy whenever I am near her—almost as if I were in the presence of Black Magic."

At Penny's expression of astonishment, she amended hastily: "Oh, I don't mean that exactly. Celeste is devoted to my stepfather and I'm sure only means to be helpful. But the truth is, she's steeped in a mysterious and not too wholesome past. Superstition is the breath of life to her."

"How did the match ends get on the stairway?"

"I wish I knew." Lorinda's forehead wrinkled with anxiety. "Celeste may have told the truth when she said neither she nor Antón had anything to do with it."

"Then how was the charm brought into the house?"

"My stepfather had enemies. Something tells me all this may have a connection with the Zudi drum."

"Didn't Celeste suggest that idea to you? She hinted that the drum—whatever it is—should be removed from the house."

"I can see myself getting rid of the Zudi drum! Why, it is my stepfather's most prized trophy! He took it from a native tribe, and as you might imagine, there was plenty of trouble!"

"Your stepfather didn't steal the drum?"

"Not exactly, though tribesmen may have regarded it that way. The drum was used in ceremonials and was highly treasured by natives. Father tried to buy it. When he couldn't, he left money and trinkets and carried off the drum. Natives pursued him for more than a hundred miles, but he got away."

"And your stepfather has the drum now?"

"Yes, we keep it in the library wall safe. Want to see it?"

"I'd love to, if it's not too much trouble."

"The truth is I want to check to be certain the drum is still here," Lorinda replied, leading the way into the adjoining room. "What Celeste said made me uneasy."

"You think your stepfather may have removed the drum from the wall safe?"

"I can't imagine him doing that. However, his long absence is puzzling, and finding the burnt match charm gives the whole situation a sinister slant. It's barely possible some of those tribesmen followed him here, hoping to recover the Zudi drum."

"Why, that seems fantastic!"

"Not if you understand tribal customs. From all my stepfather told me of his experiences, I am sure members of the Zudi cult would stop at nothing in trying to recover their ceremonial drum."

Penny inquired if Mr. Rhett ever had received threats against his life.

"Oh, dozens of them, but that was years ago. Since he married Mother, I've not heard of any. But then, my stepfather was self-contained and rather strange in many ways. If he had received threats, he might not have told her."

Becoming more interested in the story minute by minute, Penny longed to ask if Mr. and Mrs. Rhett ever had had serious disagreements. However, the question was a difficult one, and she knew of no way to phrase it without risking offense to Lorinda.

"I'd never admit it to Celeste," the Rhett girl went on, carefully drawing heavy draperies across the arched doorway of the library and closing another door which opened toward the stairs. "But seeing that match and string *ouange* gave me an unpleasant moment. I'm afraid my stepfather's enemies may have picked up his trail. In that case—well, the charm really could become an omen of evil."

"You're becoming morbid," laughed Penny. "What is there to fear in two burnt matches tied with a string?"

"Nothing perhaps," replied Lorinda, though without firm conviction. "Let's hope the Zudi drum is still here. I wish it had never been brought into the house."

A large painting of a Dutch windmill hung low on the north library wall. To Penny's surprise, Lorinda gave one of its long gold cords a jerk. The picture swung back to disclose a cleverly hidden safe.

"Now I hope I haven't forgotten the combination," Lorinda murmured.

Thinking a moment, she whirled the dials with an expert touch. The safe failed to open. With an exclamation of annoyance, she tried again. This time there was a sharp little click and as she turned the handle, the circular door swung back.

Lorinda thrust her arm deep into the opening. "It's here all right!" she exclaimed.

From the safe she drew forth a bowl-shaped drum, perhaps eight inches in diameter at the opening. An animal skin was stretched over the framework and the sides were decorated with symbols.

"This probably is my stepfather's most valuable trophy," Lorinda declared. "He treasures it above all else, because there is no other exactly like it. But the drum never should have been taken from the native tribe."

With her fingers, the girl tapped out a rhythm

on the drum. The first three notes were slow and heavy, with a series of triplets coming as a light splutter at the end.

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. . . .

Penny, who had a keen sense of the ludicrous, began to sway to the jungle rhythm. Lorinda drummed with more energy, and they both burst into laughter.

But suddenly for no apparent reason, the mirth died from Lorinda's lips and abruptly she ended the tapping.

Tossing the Zudi drum into the wall safe, she closed the heavy door and spun the dials. With another swift movement, she swung the picture into place.

Penny started to speak, but a significant glance from her companion served as a warning to remain silent.

Lorinda darted across the room, and jerked aside the heavy brocade curtains which framed the arching doorway. Crouching behind the protective folds was the same dark-skinned servant who had talked to Penny from the upstairs window!

CHAPTER

7

WHISPERING WALLS

"ANTÓN!" LORINDA exclaimed in disapproval. "Why were you listening?"

The servant, a man of perhaps forty whose well-cut livery was worn in a sloppy manner, stared at her almost insolently and without the least embarrassment.

"Hear jungle drum," he said.

"I was showing the Zudi to Miss Parker," Lorinda replied stiffly.

"You keep him in wall safe?" inquired Antón.

Lorinda bit her lip with annoyance. She made no answer.

"Now that master gone, maybe much better you get rid of Zudi drum," Antón advised.

"Why do you say that?"

"Zudi drum bring trouble. Antón tell master so when he bring it to this country."

"And what do you suggest we do with the drum?"

"Antón take care of it," the servant offered eagerly. "Sink it deep in river."

Lorinda smiled and shook her head. "The Zudi drum is my stepfather's most cherished possession. He never would forgive me if I disposed of it while he's gone."

"Maybe master never come back."

"Antón!" Lorinda reproved. "You're not to make such remarks!"

"Yes'm," the man muttered, but as he retreated from the library doorway Penny fancied she saw him smile as if well pleased with himself.

After the servant had gone, Lorinda remarked in a whisper: "I wish he hadn't seen me put the drum away. Somehow I've never trusted Antón although he's always been devoted to my stepfather. Sometimes I feel that he hates me."

"You say he didn't know until just now where the drum was kept?"

"No, he may have suspected, but he never was certain. Antón always has been deeply interested in that drum, which as I understand, belonged to another tribe—sworn enemies of Antón's group. He and Celeste helped my stepfather obtain the drum, or rather they told him about its existence, so I suppose it's natural that they remain interested."

"Antón seemed to believe the drum might bring trouble on the household."

"Just stupid superstition! He's never worried about it before." Lorinda was thoughtful a moment, then

added: "Of course, there is a possibility members of the Zudi tribe may have traced my stepfather here and intend to avenge themselves. But that hardly seems likely."

"What of the serpent drawing found in your stepfather's desk?" Penny reminded her. "And the words, 'This Shall be the End?' "

"I'd not venture an opinion until I have seen the handwriting," Lorinda returned.

As the girls were leaving the library, Penny heard an automobile rattle up to the front of the mansion. Peering from a window, she saw Salt Sommers climbing out of the car, camera and flashbulbs in his hand.

His arrival reminded her that she was here to get a story for the *Star*.

"The police aren't here?" Lorinda inquired tensely, moving to the window.

"No, it's one of our photographers. He'll need a picture of you and your mother. It will only take a minute."

Lorinda, who had been growing more and more friendly, now became cold and aloof.

"No picture," she said firmly. "I thought you understood. My mother and I wish no publicity whatsoever."

"But—"

"I am afraid I must ask you to leave now," Lorinda said.

Deeply chagrined by her failure to obtain a picture, Penny followed the Rhett girl to the front door.

"I'm sorry," Lorinda said, observing the proud tilt of Penny's chin. "It's nothing personal. I really like you very much and would like to help you—but I can't."

She opened the door and Penny went out. As the latch clicked behind her, Salt, a tall young man with an aggressive walk, came toward the porch.

"Hi, Penny!" he greeted her casually. "Sorry to be late, but I got tied up in a traffic jam at Fulton Bridge. Everything lined up for the pictures?"

Penny told him the bad news.

"Now see here, they can't do that to us," Salt said, knocking on the door of the old mansion. "I'll catch the dickens from DeWitt if I go back to the office without a picture. How about the story?"

"Not much we can use. I talked to Mrs. Rhett and her daughter, but they didn't give me any real information. Mr. Rhett's disappearance seems to be as puzzling to them as anyone else."

"You can hook your story onto that angle then. But me—I've got to come up with a picture." Salt knocked again on the door. "Say, are they all deaf in there?"

"It's no use," Penny said. "I doubt if anyone will answer."

Salt pounded a few more times, and then was forced

to admit that he was only wasting his energy. "I might take a shot of the house," he said. "Gloomy old morgue, isn't it?"

"That's about all you can do under the circumstances."

"A picture of a house," Salt groaned. "DeWitt'll go for it like a ton o' brick. He'll probably throw a typewriter at me!"

"There's another place on the grounds that might be more interesting. It's a sort of thatched roof cottage."

Salt immediately brightened. "Let's have a look-see," he proposed. "Maybe we can round up a gardener or someone who'll pose."

Circling the house, Penny led the way down the graveled path. Salt took such long strides it was hard to keep up with him. He'd had a tough day, he told her. As if taking shots of society women at the Country Club hadn't been bad enough, right on top of it he'd been sent to the airport to catch a couple of prominent state officials. And then, before he'd had a chance to get the pictures printed, DeWitt had ordered him to the mansion.

"It's just one thing after another," he muttered. "I wish someone would tell me why I don't quit newspaper photography."

"Because, no matter what you say, you like the excitement," Penny supplied. "Remember those shots

you took of the Governor that were printed in the rotogravure section?"

"Sure," grinned Salt, his good humor returning. "I also remember the time I was sent to a furniture store to take some pictures for the advertising department, and without me knowing it, the store closed for the night. I telephoned DeWitt I was locked in, and what did the old crow do? 'Just sit down and wait,'" he says. 'I'll get hold of a watchman, and we'll have you right out of there.'"

Penny had heard the story several times but did not ruin the photographer's pleasure by saying so.

"DeWitt didn't do a doggone thing!" Salt went on. "He just told everyone in the office. I cooled my heels in that place until nine o'clock at night! A fire broke out across town then, and DeWitt needed another photographer, so finally he got me out!"

"Mr. DeWitt has a queer sense of humor," Penny acknowledged. "But he is a good editor."

"Best there is," Salt agreed loyally. "But wow! He's going to tear me apart limb from limb when I come in with nothing but a picture of a thatched roof cottage!"

Penny was tempted to tell the photographer of Lorinda's strange action in warning her not to approach the building. However, she felt sure he would make light of the entire matter, so she remained silent.

"Is that the place?" Glimpsing the thatched roof cottage through the trees, Salt paused to stare at it. "Looks like a jungle hut."

"A reproduction of one, I imagine," Penny said, "but it might be the genuine product. Mr. Rhett, I've been told, was a world traveler and brought home many relics and souvenirs of jungle and cult life."

They approached closer and Salt stopped again, this time to take two shots.

"What's inside?" he asked. "Let's take a look."

Penny was curious to see the interior of the cottage despite Lorinda's warning. However, as she trotted along at Salt's heels, she experienced a strange, uneasy feeling, as if she were intruding upon forbidden ground.

The photographer was troubled by no such misgivings. Boldly he went to the door and tried to thrust it open. It was locked and would not budge.

Thwarted, he examined the painted plumed serpent which decorated the door.

"What's this thing?" he muttered.

Penny told him about the similar design which had been found on a paper in Mr. Rhett's office.

"I'll take a close-up of the door then," Salt decided. "It will tie in with your story, if you build up the mystery angle."

While the photographer took two pictures of the door, Penny wandered around to the back of the tiny

cottage. Only one small window provided light. It had been cut in the wall high toward the sloping thatched roof, and to peer into the dark interior, Penny had to stand on tiptoe.

Inside the room, a spot of light and flame drew her gaze. And at the same instant, something jabbed her ribs from behind. With a startled cry, she whirled around.

Then she laughed, for it was Salt who had come up quietly.

"You frightened me out of a year's growth!" she exclaimed. "Don't ever do that again!"

"What do you see? Anything interesting?"

"It looks as if a lamp is burning inside. But the cottage must be deserted!"

Salt peeped through the window. "It is a light—an oil flame!" he exclaimed. "But there's no one in the room."

"Let's go," said Penny with a shiver. "It's getting late and we're due back at the office."

"Not scared, are you?" the photographer teased.

"Of course not! But the door is locked, and we're not supposed to be here."

Salt tested the window. Surprisingly, it raised easily.

"Here, I'll boost you in," he offered. "Up you go! Then you can unlock the door and let me in."

"Oh, Salt, should we?"

"Why not?" he argued. "We were sent to get a story and pictures, weren't we? Well, maybe what we're after is right here."

Only half convinced, Penny permitted herself to be boosted through the window. She dropped lightly onto a wooden floor. The interior of the cottage was gloomy, brightened only by a flickering flame which came from a floating wick in a cocoanut shell filled with oil.

The atmosphere of the room was sombre, almost terrifying. Taking no time to look about, Penny scurried to unlock the door. She felt more at ease as Salt sauntered in.

"Well, this is a queer layout," he observed. "A regular jungle hut."

The room was bare of furniture except for a low wooden table upon which the cocoanut oil lamp burned. On one wall hung two black and red flags with serpentine symbols sewn with metallic beads.

Across the room, above the deep fireplace, two crossed machetes dangled from cords attached to the wall. Beneath the table was a small, crude wooden chest, and lying upon it was a rattle made from pebbles placed in a painted canister.

Salt shook the rattle several times. In the stillness of the room, the clatter of the pebbles seemed almost deafening to Penny's sensitive ears.

"Oh, please!" she pleaded.

"Don't you like it?" he teased.

Penny shook her head. With fascinated gaze, she stared at the flickering oil light.

"Do you suppose that thing burns all the time, Salt, or has someone just been here?"

"It couldn't burn very long, unless someone keeps refilling the shell with oil. Wonder what's in this chest?"

Salt stooped to raise the lid. As he did so, Penny, who stood close beside him, suddenly clutched his arm. At his look of surprise, she mumbled:

"I thought I heard something just then—like the rustling of silk!"

Salt listened a moment and chuckled. "That old imagination of yours is working overtime, Penny! Relax!"

"But I did hear a rustling sound as if someone were moving along the wall. Listen! There it is again!"

"No one could—" Salt began, and broke off. The queer look that came over his face told Penny that he too had heard the sound.

Then whispering began, and seemed to issue from the very cottage walls. At first the stunned pair could not distinguish a word. But gradually the words whispered in a throaty voice became audible.

"Go!" the warning voice commanded. "All is forbidden!"

CHAPTER

8

GHOST OF THE DARK CORNERS

SALT WAS the first to recover from surprise at the whispered warning. Convinced that someone must be crouching beneath the open cottage window, he strode across the room to peer outside.

No one was in sight.

"The voice seemed to come from the wall itself!" Penny murmured. She added jokingly. "Maybe this place has a ghost who is annoyed because we climbed in through the window!"

"That whispered warning came from a very human ghost," the photographer muttered. "We'll do a little annoying ourselves if we can find the bird!"

Salt jerked open the door. Penny followed him outside. Behind them, the door swung shut again, but neither noticed.

Quickly they circled the cottage. No one was visible in the clearing nor were leaves stirring in the bushes close by.

Salt, however, remained convinced the warning

had been whispered by someone standing close to the window who then had quickly retreated to the sheltering shrubbery.

"The warning seemed to come from the very inside of the walls," Penny repeated.

"How could it? The walls are only average thickness, so the only place a person could hide would be outside. It's a cinch no one was in the room with us!"

"Lorinda might have crept close to the cottage and whispered the warning," Penny said thoughtfully, "but I doubt it very much."

"Lorinda?"

"Mrs. Rhett's daughter. She tried to prevent me investigating the cottage before you arrived."

"Then she may have followed us here."

"The whispering voice didn't sound like hers," Penny insisted. "No, I can't believe it was Lorinda."

Salt started back toward the cottage. "Whoever it was, let's not be bluffed out, Penny. We'll see what's inside the wooden chest."

The cottage door was closed. To the photographer's annoyance, it refused to open even when he thrust his weight against it.

"Now what?" he demanded. "Did you close the door when you came out, Penny?"

"Not that I recall. The wind must have blown it shut."

"Wind? What wind? Look at the trees."

Scarcely a leaf was stirring.

"Then I'm afraid it must have been the jungle ghost," Penny said with a nervous giggle. She glanced at her wrist watch. "Salt, it's getting late. We must go."

"Not yet," retorted Salt grimly.

Again he circled the thatched cottage, with Penny tagging none too happily at his heels. As they saw the window, they both paused.

"Why, it's closed now!" Penny gasped. "How did we leave it?"

"Open. The cottage door may have blown shut by itself and locked with a spring catch, but this window is a horse of a different color. It couldn't have closed by itself."

"Who could have lowered it? How was it done without our knowledge?"

Salt had no explanation. Lifting Penny so that she could peer inside the room again, he asked her what she could see.

"Not a sign of anyone. But it's so dark—"

"See anything now?" Salt demanded impatiently as her voice trailed off.

"The cocoanut shell lamp! It's no longer burning!"

"Sure?"

"I couldn't see better if I wore bifocals! The room is dark."

"An experience like this shouldn't happen to a dog," muttered Salt. "We'll find out what's behind it! Raise the window and in we go."

Penny tugged at the sill. "Locked," she reported. "From the inside."

Disgusted, Salt allowed her to drop lightly to the ground. "Wait until I find a rock," he instructed. "We'll get in!"

Penny caught his arm. "No, Salt! We've already overstepped our rights. We mustn't damage the Rhett property."

"Well, someone is making a monkey of us," the photographer grumbled. "It burns me up!"

"There's more to it than meets the eyes, Salt. Even the atmosphere of this place is sinister."

"You say that, and yet you're willing to turn your back on an unsolved mystery? How times have changed!"

"Well—" Penny wavered, for it was true she loved mystery and adventure. But she finished in a firm voice: "We were sent here to get a story and pictures for the *Star!* We'll miss the Green Streak edition if we don't get back to the office *pronto*."

She thrust her wrist watch beneath Salt's nose. He looked at the moving hands and muttered: "Jeepers! We've got just thirty-five minutes to catch our deadline! Let's go!"

Hurriedly, they went up the path toward the

mansion and the road. As they approached the house, the rear door swung open and Lorinda came out on the flagstone terrace.

"There she is now!" Penny murmured in an undertone. "I don't believe she could have been the one who whispered the warning at the cottage! It must have been someone else."

"Is she the Rhett girl?" Salt demanded, starting to adjust his camera. "Maybe I can get a shot of her after all."

Lorinda came directly toward the pair, but she raised a hand squarely in front of her face as she saw that Salt meant to take her picture.

"Please don't!" she pleaded. "I can't pose. I only came to ask you to leave. Mother is so upset. The telephone is ringing constantly, and we expect the police any minute."

Lorinda obviously was on the verge of tears. Salt lowered his camera.

"I do want to help you," Lorinda hastened on. "That's why I am giving you this. Mother doesn't know about it, and she will be furious."

Into Penny's hand, she thrust a small but clear photograph of a middle-aged man who wore glasses. His left cheek was marred by a jagged though not particularly disfiguring scar.

"Your stepfather!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, this is the only picture we have of him. He

never liked to have his photograph taken. If you use it, please take good care of the original and see that we get it back."

"Oh, we will!" Penny promised. "This photograph should help in tracing Mr. Rhett."

"Please go now," Lorinda urged again. She glanced uneasily down the path toward the thatched-roof cottage, but if she knew what had transpired there, she gave no sign.

Elated to have obtained the photograph, Penny and Salt hastened on to the parked press car. Starting the car with a jerk, Salt followed the winding river road.

Penny cast a glance over her shoulder. Through the trees she could see only the roof-top of the thatched cottage in the clearing.

The estate was bounded by a wooden rail fence, in many places fortified with dense, tall shrubbery. The fall weather had tinted many of the bushes scarlet, yellow or bronze. Gazing toward a patch of particularly brilliant-colored leaves, Penny detected movement behind them.

For a fleeting instant she thought she had seen a large, shaggy dog. Then she became certain it was a man who crouched behind the screen of leaves.

"Salt!" she exclaimed sharply. "Look at those bushes!"

The photographer slowed the car, turning his head. "What about 'em, Penny?"

"Someone is hiding there behind the fence! Perhaps it's the person who whispered a warning at the thatched cottage!"

"Oh, it's just a shadow," Salt began, only to change his mind. "You're right! Someone is crouching there!"

So suddenly that Penny was thrown sideways, the photographer swerved the car to the curb. He swung the door open.

"What are you going to do?" Penny demanded.

The photographer did not take time to reply. Already he was out of the car, running toward the hedge.

CHAPTER

9

JERRY ENTERS THE CASE

AS SALT ran toward him, the man who crouched behind the bushes began to move stealthily away. From the car Penny could not see his face which was screened by dense foliage.

"Salt, he's getting away!" she shouted.

Salt climbed over the fence. His clothing got snagged and by the time he had freed himself and struggled through a tangle of vines and bushes, the man he pursued had completely disappeared.

"Which way did he go, Penny?" he called.

"I lost sight of him after he ducked into a clump of shrubbery," she replied regretfully. "It's useless to try to find him now."

Salt came back to the car, and starting the engine, drove on.

"You didn't see who it was?" Penny asked hopefully.

"No, I think it was a man. Maybe the Rhett's gardener or a tramp."

"Whoever it was, I'm sure he stood there watching us drive away from the grounds," Penny declared.

Until the car was far down the street, she alertly watched the Rhett grounds. However, the one who had crouched by the fence now was well hidden and on guard. Not a movement of the bushes betrayed his presence.

As the Rhett mansion was lost completely from view, Penny's thoughts came back to the story which she must write. Nervously, she glanced at her wrist watch.

"What's the bad news?" Salt asked, stepping hard on the gasoline pedal.

"Twenty-five minutes until deadline. Can you make it?"

Salt's lips compressed into a grim line and he concentrated on his driving, avoiding heavy traffic and red lights as they approached the center of town.

They came at last to the big stone building downtown which housed the *Riverview Star*. As Salt pulled up at the curb, Penny leaped out and ran inside. Without waiting for an elevator, she darted up the stairs to the busy newsroom.

Editor DeWitt was talking on a telephone, and, all about him, reporters were tapping typewriters at a furious pace.

Editor DeWitt held his hand over the phone mouthpiece and fixed Penny with a gloomy eye. "Time

you got here," he observed. "Anything new? Did you get the pictures?"

Penny produced the photograph of Mr. Rhett which the editor studied an instant, then tossed to his assistant, with a terse: "Make it a one column—rush!"

Knowing that with a deadline practically at hand Mr. DeWitt was in no mood for a lengthy tale, Penny told him only such facts as were pertinent to Mr. Rhett's disappearance.

"So the family won't talk?" DeWitt growled. "Well, play up that angle. We've already set up everything you gave us over the phone. Make this an add and get it right out."

Penny nodded and slid into a chair behind the nearest typewriter. An "add" she knew, was an addition to a story already set up in type. It was easier to write than a "lead" which contained the main facts of all that had happened, but even so, she would be hard pressed to make the deadline.

For a moment she concentrated, but the noises of the room distracted her somewhat. Editor DeWitt was barking into the telephone again; a reporter on her left side was clicking a pencil against the desk; the short-wave radio blared a police call; and across the room someone bellowed: "Copy boy!"

Then Penny began to write, and the noises blanked out, until she was aware only of the moving ribbon of words on the copy paper. She had written perhaps

four paragraphs when DeWitt ordered tersely: "Give me a take."

Without looking up, Penny nodded, wrote a few more words, then jerked the copy from her machine. A boy snatched it from her hand and carried it to DeWitt, who read it rapidly. Pencilling a few minor corrections, he shot it to the copy desk.

Meanwhile, with another sheet of paper rolled in her machine, Penny was grinding out more of the story. Words flowed easily now, and she scarcely paused to think.

DeWitt called for more copy. Again she ripped it from the roller and gave it to the boy.

After the third "take," DeWitt called: "That's enough. Make her '30.'"

Penny understood the term. It signified the end of the story, and usually when reporters had completed an article, they wrote the figure at the bottom of the copy sheet.

Finishing the sentence she had started, she gave the last of her story to the boy, and settling back, took a deep breath. DeWitt's chair was empty. He had gone to the composing room, leaving his assistant to handle the final copy that came through before the presses rolled.

Penny knew that the last page she had written probably would not make the edition, but it did not matter. She had crammed all the important and most

interesting of her information into the first part of the story. In any event, everything she had written would be used in the second edition, the Three Star, which followed the Green Streak by two hours. The final edition rolled from the presses later in the evening and was known as the Blue Streak.

A well-built, good looking reporter with a pencil tucked behind one ear, walked over to the desk.

"Big day, Penny?" he inquired affectionately.

Jerry Livingston, who rated as the *Star's* best reporter, also stood at the very top of Penny's long list of friends.

With Jerry, Penny always felt comfortable and at ease. Now she found herself telling him about the Rhett case, omitting few details of what had occurred in the thatched roof cottage. It took longer to relate all the events than Penny realized, for, before she had finished the story, the Green Streak edition was up, and a boy was distributing papers about the office. Penny reached eagerly for one, noting instantly that her article appeared in good position on the front page.

"Wonder who wrote the lead?" she asked. "You, Jerry?"

"Guilty," he laughed. "Any mistakes?"

Penny could find none. It was a perfect rewrite, based upon facts she had telephoned to the office after leaving the bank. The story had a professional swing

she could not have achieved. Her own "add" went into it very smoothly, however, so that few persons reading the account ever would guess two reporters had contributed to the writing.

Mr. DeWitt had returned from the composing room, and with a relaxed air settled down to enjoy a cigarette. Now that the edition was rolling off the press, he no longer seemed nervous or irritable.

Presently he waved his hand toward Penny who went over to see what he wanted.

"This Rhett story is likely to develop into something," he said. "I'll want double coverage, so I'm assigning Jerry to help you. He'll handle the police angle."

Penny nodded, secretly glad it was Jerry who had been directed to help her instead of another reporter. Police work, particularly the checking of routine reports, was vitally important but uninteresting. She was pleased to escape it.

"You're to keep close tab on the Rhett mansion," Mr. DeWitt instructed. "Report everything of consequence that happens there. By tomorrow things may start popping."

The wire editor came swiftly to DeWitt's desk with a sheet of copy which had just been torn from an Associated Press teletype.

"Here's something," he said. "A few hours ago police published for all state banks the numbers of

those bonds stolen from the First National Bank. According to this Culver City dispatch, one of the bonds, in $1,000 denomination, turned up there yesterday."

"Yesterday?" Penny inquired.

"Sure, a Culver City bank took the bond in, not knowing it was one of the missing ones. Late this afternoon, police sent out the numbers to every bank in the state."

DeWitt read the news item carefully, his eyes glinting with interest.

"Too bad Albert Potts didn't notify the police several days ago. Rhett may be half way to the Mexican border by this time."

"Then you believe he walked off with the bonds?" asked Penny.

"Looks like it," shrugged the editor. "There's no other suspect. Or if there is, the police aren't talking. More of those missing bonds may show up. Jerry, get busy on the telephone!" he called to the reporter who sat nearby.

"What's doing?" Jerry inquired, getting up and coming to the desk.

DeWitt thrust the dispatch into his hand. "Get hold of that Culver City banker," he instructed. "Find out who turned the bond in, and if the description fits Rhett."

Jerry was occupied at the telephone for nearly fifteen minutes. He returned to report: "The bond

was turned in by a woman, and the bank clerk didn't make a record of her name."

"Any description?"

"No, the clerk only remembers that she was a middle-aged woman."

DeWitt sighed heavily and turned his attention to other matters. Penny glanced at the clock. It was after six o'clock. Her father, she knew, would have left the office nearly an hour earlier. She could catch a bus home, but first a cup of coffee across the street might help to fortify her until she could enjoy a home-cooked dinner by Mrs. Weems.

As she started away from the office, Jerry followed her.

"Going across the way for a bite to eat?" he asked. "Mind if I tag along?"

"I wish you would," she replied eagerly. "We can talk about the Rhett case."

"Oh, let's bury that until tomorrow. I'd rather talk about a dozen other subjects—you, for instance."

"Me?"

"About that little curl behind your ear. Or the smudge of carbon on the end of your nose!"

"Oh! Why didn't you tell me before?" Indignantly, Penny peered at her reflection in a hand mirror and rubbed vigorously with her handkerchief.

Outside the *Star* building, newsboys were shouting their wares. As Penny and Jerry started to cross the

street, one of the lads who had received a job through the girl's influence, spied the pair.

Approaching, he flashed a paper in front of their eyes.

"See this bird who robbed the bank!" he exclaimed, pointing to the picture of Hamilton Rhett.

"Tommy, I'm afraid your reading is inaccurate," Penny laughed. "The story doesn't say Mr. Rhett robbed a bank."

"He must have done it," the newsboy insisted. "What's the reward for his capture?"

"Mr. Rhett is not listed as a criminal," Penny explained. "There is no reward."

Tommy's face dropped an inch.

"What's the matter, son?" asked Jerry. "Figuring on cashing in?"

"Well, sort of," the boy admitted. "I saw the fellow not an hour ago!"

"He wasn't robbing another bank?" Jerry teased.

"He was going into a house on Fulton Street. I didn't take down the number 'cause when I saw him I didn't think nothin' of it. The Green Streak wasn't out then, and I hadn't seen his picture in the paper."

"Fulton Street?" repeated Penny, frowning. "What section?"

"It was at the corner of Fulton and Cherry. He went into an old three-story brick building with a sign: 'Rooms for rent—beds thirty cents.' "

"Why, Tommy means Riverview's cheapest flop house!" Jerry exclaimed. "I can't imagine a bank president luxuriating in a Fulton Street dump."

"All the same, I saw him. He wore old clothes, but it was the same bird."

"Tommy, you'll grow up to be a police detective some day," Jerry chuckled. He started to pull Penny along, but she held back.

"Wait, Jerry, if there should be anything to it—"

Jerry smiled indulgently.

"Tell us more about the man you saw," Penny urged Tommy. "How was he dressed?"

"He wore old clothes and a floppy black hat. And there was a scar on his cheek."

"Jerry, Mr. Rhett had a similar scar!"

"And so have dozens of other people. Did I ever show you the one I got when I was a kid? Another boy socked me with a bottle and—"

"Be serious, Jerry! Tommy, are you sure the man you saw looked like the picture in the paper?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die. It was the spitten image! If you catch him, will you give me a reward?"

"We'll split fifty-fifty," grinned Jerry, pulling Penny on by brute force.

But across the street he met unexpected opposition. Stopping dead in her tracks, Penny announced: "This is where we part company. I'm going to investigate that place on Fulton Street!"

"Say, are you crazy? You can't go to a flop house alone!"

"That's exactly what I shall do, unless you come with me."

"It's a waste of time! You know these kids. Tommy read the story, and it fired his imagination."

"Maybe so," admitted Penny, unmoved. "All the same, I'm going there to make certain. How about you?"

Jerry looked longingly at the restaurant and drew a deep sigh.

"Okay," he gave in, "I learned years ago that it's no use arguing with a gal. Lead on, but don't say I didn't warn you!"

CHAPTER

10

CHEAP LODGING

STREET LIGHTS blinked on as Penny and Jerry reached the corner of Fulton and Cherry Streets, in the poorer section of Riverview.

"That must be the building," the reporter said, indicating an old, discolored brick building with a faded sign which proclaimed it a cheap rooming house of the type patronized by those who could afford only a few cents for a bed.

They crossed the street. Penny's courage faltered as she saw that they must climb a long, dark stairway. Dust was very thick; the air inside was stuffy.

"You still can change your mind, you know," said Jerry. "Why not wait outside, while I go up?"

Penny shook her head.

Climbing the stairs, they entered an open space from which branched narrow corridors. The landing was even dirtier and darker than the stairway, with a huge pasteboard carton standing in a corner filled with empty bottles.

In a little office room, behind a cage window, sat a plump middle-aged woman with reddish frizzled hair. She eyed the pair suspiciously. To her experienced eye, their manner and clothing immediately stamped them as "outsiders," perhaps investigators. She smiled ingratiatingly at Jerry.

"We're looking for a man," he said briefly.

"You're from the police, ain't you?" she demanded. "We got nothin' to hide. My husband and me run a respectable place for poor workin' men."

"May we see your room register?"

"Sure. Ever since that last copper was here I been keepin' it just like he told me I had to do."

Through the wooden slats of the cage, the woman thrust a grimy notebook which had been ruled off to provide spaces for names, addresses and date of registry.

Rapidly Jerry scanned the entries for several days back. No one by the name of Rhett had registered, but neither he nor Penny had expected the banker would be stupid enough to use his real name, if indeed he had come to such a place.

As Penny glanced about the dingy, smoke-stained room, it seemed impossible to her that Mr. Rhett, a man of culture and wealth, would voluntarily seek such quarters.

"The man we're looking for is middle-aged," Penny explained. "He wore glasses and may have

been well dressed. We were told he was seen here earlier tonight."

"They all look alike to me," the woman said wearily. "Most of my rooms are empty now. We don't fill up until the coppers start runnin' loiterers off Cherry Street around ten o'clock. It's still warm enough outside so's a lot o' the cheap skates can sleep out on the river bank."

"Isn't anyone here?" inquired Jerry.

"Maybe one or two men. A fella name of Ben Smith came in about an hour or two ago. He signed up for one of the flops. Come to think of it, maybe he's the one you're after. He acted nervous like and I figured maybe he was dodgin' the police. Another thing, he acted like he was used to havin' money."

"Did he have much on him?"

"I couldn't see, but he paid me with a five dollar bill. And why would a fella with even that much dough sleep in a flop if he wasn't tryin' to dodge the cops?"

"Suppose you describe the man."

"He was about average height and middle-aged. No glasses, though. He couldn't have been down and out very long, because he still wore a ring."

"Describe it, please," requested Penny.

"It was a gold ring with a picture of a snake on it —some sort of order probably."

"The plumed serpent!" exclaimed Penny. "Jerry, perhaps Tommy was right!"

"Take us to this man," the reporter directed the landlady.

"How do I know if he's still here? The men come and go and so long as they're paid up, I don't pay no attention. What's he done anyhow?"

"Nothing very serious," Jerry replied. "Anyway, we're not from the police station."

The woman's pretended friendliness vanished. "Then what you pryin' around here for?" she demanded. "Who are you anyhow?"

"We're newspaper reporters."

"I don't want my name in the paper, and we don't want nothing written about this place!"

"Take it easy," Jerry advised. "Your name won't be in the paper. We're only looking for a man. Now lead us to him."

"When people take rooms or a bed in this place they got a right to privacy," the woman argued unpleasantly. "It ain't none o' my business what folks have done that come here."

"We want to talk to this man who registered as Smith. Either take us to him, or we'll have to call in the police. I'm a personal friend of Joe Grabey, the patrolman on this beat."

"I was only kiddin'," the woman said hastily. "You can talk to him if he's here."

Locking the office door behind her, the woman led the pair down a narrow corridor with rooms on either

side. A door stood open. Penny caught a glimpse of a cell-like chamber, furnished only with a sagging bed, soiled blankets, and a rickety dresser. The dingy walls were lined with pegs.

"Those nails are for hanging up clothes, and symbolize a man's rise in the world," Jerry pointed out to her. "Men who patronize the flops usually have only the suit on their backs. But when they make a little money and get two suits, they need a safe place to keep the extra clothes during the day. So they rent one of these tiny rooms which can be locked."

Leading the way down a dark hall to the very end, the landlady opened a door. This room with paper-thin walls, sheltered perhaps twenty men, each cot jammed close to its neighbor. The air was disagreeable with the odor of strong disinfectant which had been used on the bare wood floor.

The room now was deserted save for a man in baggy black trousers who sat on one of the cots, reading a comic magazine. Other beds were made up, but empty.

"Is that man Ben Smith?" Penny asked in disappointment, for he bore not the slightest resemblance to the picture of Mr. Rhett.

"No, I don't know what became of Smith, if he ain't here," the landlady answered. She called to the man on the cot. "Jake, seen anyone in here during the last hour?"

He shook his head, staring curiously at the intruders.

To Jerry the woman said: "You'll have to come back later if you want to see Smith. Maybe after ten o'clock."

Jerry scribbled his name and telephone number on a sheet of notebook paper.

"If he does show up, will you telephone me?" he requested.

"Oh, sure," the woman replied, her careless tone making it clear she would never put herself to so much trouble.

Jerry gave her a five dollar bill. "This should make it worth your while," he said. "You'll earn another five if we find the man."

"I'll call you the minute he comes in," the woman promised with more enthusiasm.

Penny drew a deep breath as she and Jerry left the building, stepping out into the cool, sweet air of the street.

"I still doubt we're trailing the right man," remarked Jerry. "Why would Hamilton Rhett hole in at a place like this?"

"It does seem out of the picture. However, we know he wore a serpent ring at the time of his disappearance."

"The ring may not be the same. Also, if Rhett had been the victim of violence, a bum might have stolen it from him."

"I never thought of that. Should we report what we've learned to the police?"

"Not yet," advised Jerry. "Our clue is pretty flimsy. Let's watch and wait. The landlady may call us, and in any case I'll keep my eye on this place."

It now was so late that Penny decided to return home immediately. Bidding Jerry goodbye at the next corner, she boarded a bus and presently was slipping quietly into her own home.

If she had hoped to elude the watchful eye of Mrs. Maud Weems, the housekeeper, she was doomed to disappointment.

The plump, kindly lady who had looked after Penny since the death of Mrs. Parker many years before, had finished the dishes and was sweeping the kitchen. Fixing the girl with a stern eye, she observed:

"You're later than ever tonight, Penny. When your father came home nearly two hours ago, he had no idea what had become of you."

"Then Dad isn't keeping tab on his employes," chuckled Penny. "I've been working on a special story for the *Star*."

"I've heard that one before," sighed the housekeeper. "In fact, I suspect you charge a great many of your escapades to your work! If I had my way you would give it up."

"Oh, Mrs. Weems, don't be cross," Penny pleaded,

giving her a squeeze. "Newspaper work is wonderful! Next time I'll telephone you if I know I'll be late."

"Have you had anything to eat?" the housekeeper asked in a softened tone. "Dinner was over an hour ago."

"I'll dig up something for myself from the refrigerator. Where's Dad?"

Even as Penny asked the question, Anthony Parker, a tall, lean man with graying hair, came to the arched doorway of the kitchen. "Now what's all this?" he inquired. "Penny off the reservation again?"

Mrs. Weems made no reply, knowing only too well that in almost any argument the publisher would support his daughter. Many times, and without success, she had told him she disapproved of his system of granting Penny almost unrestricted freedom.

No one doubted that Mr. Parker was an over-indulgent father, but the publisher had raised his daughter according to a strict code. He knew that she had writing talent and a flare for tracking down a story. Only because she had demonstrated that she could look after herself and think clearly in an emergency, did he allow her to make most of her own decisions.

Now, Penny eagerly poured out an account of her experiences in trying to get the Rhett story for the *Star*. Mr. Parker, who had read most of it in the

Green Streak edition, listened attentively, offering little comment other than to say:

"I met Rhett once at a Chamber of Commerce luncheon. Not a bad fellow."

"What was he like?" Penny inquired eagerly.

"Quiet and rather bored by the meeting. I don't recall that he said a dozen words during the luncheon."

"Did he look like a man who would walk off with $250,000 in bonds?"

"Not that I noticed," commented the publisher dryly. "But then, nobody can judge character by external appearances."

Hat in hand, Mr. Parker moved toward the kitchen exit.

"Are you going back to the *Star* office?" his daughter asked with alert interest.

"No." Mr. Parker edged nearer the door, but Penny blocked the way.

"Then where are you going, Dad? You're holding out!"

"Must I give you a schedule of my life?"

"You're slipping off somewhere, and you don't want me to go!"

"If you must know, I thought I would drop in at the Gay Nineties, a new night club that is opening tonight. The proprietor is one of our best advertisers and he extended a special invitation to attend."

"Fine!" chuckled Penny. "I'll be with you in five minutes. Just give me time to wash my face and pull the snarls out of my hair."

"I was afraid of it," groaned the publisher. "Haven't you any school work to do?"

"Nary a bit. Besides, it's Saturday night and I haven't had any dinner. You can buy me a great big steak with all the trimmings. And perhaps you will dance with me."

Mr. Parker gazed helplessly at Mrs. Weems, but the housekeeper did not come to his rescue. Her shrug indicated that the problem was entirely his.

"Well, all right," he gave in. "But I'll warn you now, this is no party. We'll drop in for an hour or so, then come straight home."

Penny was off like a shot, bounding upstairs to her room. There was no time to change her dress, but she freshened up, and was ready by the time her father had backed the car from the garage.

The Gay Nineties on Euclid Avenue twinkled with lights, and many persons in evening dress were entering beneath the bright red street canopy.

"Looks like all the socialites of the city are here," Penny observed. "Maybe I should have worn my pearls."

"Or washed behind your ears," Mr. Parker chuckled, escorting her inside.

Penny and her father were given one of the best

tables in the night club. Studying the menu, the girl was a trifle alarmed to note the prices.

"I'm dreadfully hungry too," she declared. "Dad, I hope you're not intending to charge this outing against my allowance."

"I know I'd have no chance to collect," he teased. "Just relax and select whatever you want. I can stand it this time."

After the order had been given, Penny glanced about the dimly lighted room. The floor show had not yet started. Everywhere she saw well-to-do and prominent persons who had turned out for the gala opening.

Suddenly her attention centered upon a couple who had just entered the door. The woman wore an obviously new white evening gown, and behind her came a short, stubby little man.

"Dad!" she whispered, giving him a kick with the toe of her slipper. "See that man who just came in?"

"Where?" he asked, turning his head.

"He's with the middle-aged woman in white."

"Oh, yes, who are they?" Mr. Parker commented, only mildly interested. "No one I know."

"The man is Albert Potts, secretary to Mr. Rhett at the First National Bank," Penny replied impressively. "How do you suppose he can afford to come to such an expensive night club? If you ask me, Dad, it looks odd!"

CHAPTER

11

THE WOODEN DOLL

MR. PARKER studied the bank secretary and his wife with more interest. But he said mildly:

"I see nothing especially significant in Potts coming here, Penny. The club is public."

"It's expensive too. The cover charge is two dollars, and you can't touch a dinner for less than another four! How can Potts afford to pay such prices?"

"He may earn a good salary working for Mr. Rhett —probably does. Anyway, folks don't always spend their money wisely, even if they have very little of it."

Potts and his wife swept past the Parker table without noticing Penny or her father. A trifle self-consciously, as if unaccustomed to appearing in such places, they sat down and studied the menu with concentrated interest.

Penny tried but could not keep her eyes from the pair.

"Dad, I wonder if Potts has any more information about Mr. Rhett's disappearance," she presently re-

marked. "I have a notion to go over there and ask him."

Mr. Parker nodded absently, so Penny started across the room. She was only midway to Potts' table, when the bank secretary raised his eyes and saw her approaching.

A startled, almost dismayed expression came upon his face. He spoke hurriedly to his wife. She looked puzzled, but both arose and walked quickly toward the exit.

Penny started to follow, then thought better of it.

"Mr. Potts knows I'm a reporter," she reflected. "Probably he doesn't care to be annoyed by having to answer questions. On the other hand, is it possible he doesn't want to be recognized in this night club?"

Mr. and Mrs. Potts obtained their wraps at the checkroom and left the building. Somewhat crestfallen, Penny returned to her own table to find her father chatting with acquaintances.

Under the circumstance, she had no opportunity to speak of Mr. Potts' queer behavior. Soon, dinners were brought and after that the floor show began.

Not wishing to keep his daughter out late, Mr. Parker insisted that they leave in the middle of the entertainment. However, the drive home gave Penny time to tell him about the bank secretary. The incident did not seem to impress her father greatly.

"If I were you I wouldn't pester Potts too much,"

he advised. "He probably doesn't enjoy being the center of public attention."

Penny slept late the next morning, and because it was Sunday, did not visit the *Star* office. The paper that day was voluminous. But in going through it she could find no new facts about the Rhett case. No word had been received from the missing banker; there had been no ransom demand received; and neither had Albert Potts nor Mrs. Rhett shed the slightest light on what might have become of him.

After breakfast, Penny telephoned Jerry Livingston to inquire if he had heard from the Cherry Street landlady.

"Not a word," he reported. "I dropped back there late last night, but the man we're looking for apparently never returned."

Disappointed that the case had reached a dead end, Penny next telephoned the Rhett home. No one answered.

"I'm certain someone is there," she thought. "Mrs. Rhett probably has given orders not to answer the phone."

At a loss to know what to do, Penny spent the morning at home, had dinner, then went down the street to see Louise Sidell. However, her chum had gone to visit an aunt for the day.

"What miserable luck!" Penny muttered. "No one with whom I can talk over the Rhett case! Nothing to do!"

Suddenly it dawned upon her, that she might call on Albert Potts at his home, and perhaps induce him to reveal a few helpful facts about the missing banker.

From a telephone book she obtained the secretary's address. Thirty minutes later found her standing before a modest cottage on Berdan Avenue. In response to her knock, the same woman Penny had seen the previous night at the Gay Nineties, came to the door. Now she looked very plain and frowsy in a messy housedress, and her hair hung in untidy streamers.

The woman stared at Penny without recognition.

"Is Mr. Potts here?" the girl inquired.

"No, he's not," Mrs. Potts answered without cordiality, her voice coarse and unattractive. "Anything I can do?"

"I wanted to talk to him. Will he return soon?" Penny moved inside the door.

"When he goes off, I never know when he'll get back. He went to the bank, I guess."

"On Sunday?"

"Al's had a lot of work lately. I tell him he ought to let up. He's getting so jumpy he doesn't sleep at nights. Just tosses and keeps me awake."

Before Penny could ask another question, a boy of ten, who had Albert Potts' sharp features, came racing across the yard up to the door.

"Has the bicycle come yet, Ma?" he shouted.

"No, it hasn't, and I wish you'd quit pestering me!" she snapped. "There won't be any deliveries today."

To Penny, the woman explained: "My husband bought Eddie a new bicycle and he won't give us any peace until it comes. Deliveries take such a long time these days. None of the things we bought have come yet."

Penny did not mean to be inquisitive, but instantly it struck her as unusual that the Potts' family should be indulging in a sudden orgy of spending. Nor had she forgotten the couple's hasty departure from the Gay Nineties club.

"Eddie is getting quite a few new things, I take it," she observed casually.

The woman became more friendly. "Oh, yes, my husband ordered a trapeze set for him, and an electric train. But he bought me a lot too! A new piano and a living room rug. We have a new refrigerator on order, a vacuum cleaner and a bedroom suite!"

"Imagine!" exclaimed Penny. "Your husband must have come into a small fortune."

"He was given a raise last week at the bank. I don't know exactly how much, but it must have been a big one, because Al says we'll have enough now for everything we need."

"I think I've seen you before, Mrs. Potts," Penny remarked, seeking additional information. "Weren't you at the Gay Nineties last night?"

"Yes, we were! But we didn't stay long. Before we had ordered our dinner, my husband remembered

an important appointment he had made. We had to leave suddenly. It was awfully disappointing. I never went to a night club before and I wanted to see the show!"

Mrs. Potts paused, obviously waiting for Penny to leave. "I'll tell my husband you called," she said. "You didn't give me your name."

Edging out of the door, Penny pretended not to hear the latter remark. Calling over her shoulder that she would try to see Mr. Potts at the bank next day, she retreated before the woman could learn her identity.

Walking toward the bus stop, the girl reflected upon what she had learned. The financial good fortune of the Potts' family was very puzzling. Apparently the bank secretary's salary had been increased since the disappearance of his employer, Mr. Rhett.

"It seems a queer time to raise the man," she mused. "If his duties have become so much heavier, I suppose the bank board may have granted a compensating wage increase. But it must have been an enormous one to enable him to buy everything in the stores!"

As Penny waited at the street corner for a homebound bus, she saw one approaching which was headed for the outlying section near the Rhett estate area. Impulsively, she decided to go there to see Lorinda.

"I may not get into the house," she thought. "My

luck is running badly today. Anyway, I'll give it a try."

It was nearly four o'clock by the time Penny alighted from the bus and walked to the Rhett estate. Her heart sank as she noticed that curtains were drawn in nearly all of the front windows of the house.

"No one here," she thought. "Lorinda and her mother may have left town to escape questioning by reporters and the police."

Because she had come so far, she knocked on the front door. No one came. Giving it up, she wandered around the house, into the garden.

Curiously she gazed toward the thatched roof cottage, wondering if anyone were there. The whispered warning she and Salt had heard the previous day, remained unexplained. She longed to investigate, yet hestitated to trespass.

As she debated, Penny observed a small column of black smoke rising from amid the shrubbery. Someone apparently had built a bonfire on the beach.

Seeking the steps which led down to the river, Penny presently saw that her guess was correct. A small fire of driftwood had been built on the sands. Lorinda, in slacks and an old sweater, was so engrossed in feeding the flames that she did not hear when her name was called.

Descending the steps, Penny hastened to the beach to join the Rhett girl. Lorinda did not hear the ap-

proaching footsteps. Deeply absorbed in what she was doing, she stirred the flames with a stick until they leaped merrily.

Then, from a paper sack she withdrew a queer wooden object which even from the distance Penny could see was a doll. Its body appeared to be tightly wound with scarlet thread.

Lorinda held the doll gingerly in her fingers. She stared at it a moment, shuddered, and then with a gesture of abhorrence, hurled it into the crackling flames.

CHAPTER

12

SUPERSTITION

PENNY QUICKENED her step. "Lorinda!" she called again.

The girl at the bonfire whirled around. Seeing Penny, she gave the wooden doll a shove with the toe of her shoe, trying to bury it beneath a pile of burning wood.

Penny was not to be so easily deceived. Reaching the fire, she asked directly: "Lorinda, what in the world are you doing?"

"Why, nothing."

"You're burning something you don't want me to see!"

"It's nothing. Just an old doll."

The wooden object had not yet caught fire, and Penny could still see it plainly.

"Why, it's an effigy doll!" she exclaimed, then observing the face clearly, she added in a shocked voice: "A likeness of your mother!"

The scarlet string around the doll's body caught

fire, and soon tongues of flame began to consume the wood. Only then did Lorinda speak.

"Now it is destroyed! But I cannot so easily destroy the evil that threatens my mother!"

"Why, Lorinda! What do you mean? Why are you burning this doll?"

Lorinda sank down on the sand, her eyes upon the fire. "I hadn't intended anyone to know. You swear you will never tell Mother?"

"Of course not."

"I found this doll in a downstairs coat closet. You saw for yourself that it was an effigy of Mother and that it was wrapped with string?"

"Yes, but I fail to understand its significance."

"That scarlet wool string is known as a life-thread. Each day a little of the thread is unwound until finally it all is gone. Then the person dies."

"Not your Mother, Lorinda! Surely, you don't believe such a crazy superstition!"

"I don't," Lorinda answered, her voice barely above a whisper. "*But Mother will* if she learns about the doll. That is why she will die, unless I can do something to break the spell."

To Penny the words seemed fantastic, but she realized Lorinda was deadly in earnest and convinced that she was speaking the truth.

"Let's get to the bottom of this, Lorinda. How did the doll come into the house?"

"I only wish I knew. Obviously, it was brought by someone who hates my mother. The doll was carved in her image, and no doubt deadly *basiko* and *dayama* incantations were chanted as the string was wrapped tightly about the body."

"Who told you all this lingo?" Penny demanded suspiciously. "Your stepfather?"

"I learned a little of it from him," Lorinda admitted, "but most of my knowledge came from Celeste and Antón."

"Superstitious natives!"

"Laugh if you like, but this form of dark magic which is practiced in the jungles, is a sort of hypnotism. The victim weakens and dies because he *believes that he is doomed.*"

"Then the antidote is simple. Just don't put any stock in such rot."

"Easily said, but the victim *always believes.*"

"You think your mother will put faith in all this?" Penny scoffed.

Lorinda gave her a strange look. "I know she will, if she learns about the doll. That's why I'm burning it."

"A very sensible act. The doll is destroyed. We'll keep this strictly to ourselves, and the spell is broken!"

"You make it sound very easy."

"Your mother hasn't seen the doll?"

"No, I only found it a few minutes ago."

"Then she'll never hear about it. Haven't you any theory as to how the effigy got into the house?"

"No," Lorinda replied, after a slight hesitation.

"Would your stepfather have had a hand in it?"

"Oh, I don't think so! It would be such a vicious, wicked thing to do!"

"He and your mother always got on well together?"

"No, they had frequent disagreements," Lorinda admitted, squirming uncomfortably. "All the same, my stepfather was not a cruel man."

"Do you have utter confidence in Antón and Celeste?"

"They have been fairly efficient servants. Mother always has treated them well. What reason could they have for hating her?"

"I'm sure I can't see any. Yet someone brought the doll into the house after carving it in your mother's image." Penny thought a moment, and then asked: "Could the Zudi drum have anything to do with it?"

"That angle occurred to me," Lorinda nodded. "From the first, I've been afraid that natives would trail my stepfather here and try to revenge themselves upon him for taking the drum."

"Celeste and Antón are not members of the Zudi cult?"

"No, else they never would have aided my step-

father in acquiring the drum. I understand he never would have heard of it if Celeste hadn't told him of its existence."

"It's all a queer puzzle," Penny commented. "While I suppose it's possible natives could have followed your father to America and now seek revenge upon his wife, such a theory doesn't quite ring the gong."

"Celeste thinks we should get rid of the Zudi drum. Unless we do, she's convinced Mother will die a slow lingering death."

"Celeste seems to have implanted quite a few ideas in your mind," Penny observed dryly. "If you ask me, I should say she's a sinister influence on the household."

"Oh, Celeste means no harm. And the last few days since my stepfather disappeared, she's been very devoted to Mother, waiting on her as if she were a baby."

"Your mother must be terribly worried. You've heard nothing from your stepfather?"

"Not a word. Mother cries half the time, and this morning she refused to leave her room. Even now I'm afraid she is ill."

"Now Lorinda!" reproved Penny. "I'm afraid you're the one who has become hypnotized by that doll!"

"I hope it's just that I'm silly, and that there's nothing to it. But I'm afraid—terribly afraid."

Penny picked up a stick and poked the dying embers. She could find only a charred piece of the doll left on the fire. Flames soon consumed it.

"There, it's gone!" she exclaimed. "Take my advice, Lorinda, and forget this entire incident. Don't tell your mother, Celeste, or anyone."

Lorinda scrambled up, brushing sand from her slacks.

"All right, I'll do as you say," she agreed. "This shall be our secret. At any rate, by burning the doll, I should have put an end to its evil."

Extinguishing the few remaining flames by covering them with sand, the girls slowly climbed the steps. Penny inquired whether or not the police had called at the mansion. Lorinda told her that they had spent nearly two hours questioning Mrs. Rhett.

"By the way," Penny remarked as they approached the house, "do you know Albert Potts?"

"My stepfather's secretary? I've met him a few times. Why?"

"He was quite a favorite with your stepfather, I suppose?"

"A favorite?" Lorinda chuckled. "On the contrary, he couldn't stand him! Potts was always at his elbow, trying to tell him what to do, and what not to do. In his way he was efficient—too efficient, if you know what I mean."

"I do," agreed Penny. "That was why I was sur-

prised to learn he had been granted a substantial salary increase after your stepfather disappeared."

Lorinda turned her head quickly. "A pay raise? By the board, you mean?"

"I don't know who gave it to him."

"I can't imagine anyone giving old Potts a raise. Certainly not the board. The members meet only once a month, on the fifteenth. Of course, it's possible a special session was called because of my stepfather's absence."

"That may have happened," agreed Penny. "At any rate, Mr. Potts seemingly has come into money."

Rounding a twist in the path, the girls came within view of the mansion terrace where Mrs. Rhett, in white, reclined.

"Why, Mother is downstairs!" Lorinda exclaimed in surprise.

The woman did not see the girls until they were very close. But as they reached the terrace, she raised her eyes, and smiled in a brief, sad manner. Penny instantly noted the pallor of her face.

"I appreciate your efforts, Lorinda," she said before either of the girls spoke. "But it is useless."

"What is useless, Mother?" inquired her daughter.

"I saw smoke rising from your fire on the beach."

Lorinda glanced quickly at Penny, laughed nervously and said: "Oh, that! I was burning a little driftwood."

Mrs. Rhett held her daughter's eyes in a steady, knowing gaze.

"It is useless to try to deceive me," she said quietly. "I know you burned the doll."

"Whatever gave you such an idea, Mother?"

"I know," replied the woman with quiet finality. "First the burnt match ends and now the doll! My life thread is reaching its end, and I shall slowly weaken and die."

CHAPTER

13

MISSING FROM THE CHEST

"MOTHER, HOW did you learn about the wooden doll?" Lorinda gasped. "And where did you get such a crazy idea that you will weaken and die?"

"I have known it ever since my husband went away."

"But that's impossible!" cried Lorinda, fairly beside herself with anxiety. "I'm sure the doll wasn't in the house until today. Someone is putting these notions in your head! Is it Celeste?"

"Celeste is doing her best to help, but there is nothing she can do," Mrs. Rhett said sadly.

"Mother, snap out of this! You're worried about Father and it has made you morbid. Nothing will happen to you. The doll has been destroyed, and in any case, we know it's only a stupid effigy."

Dropping her head wearily on the chair back, Mrs. Rhett smiled and said nothing. Closing her eyes, she relaxed for a moment. Penny and Lorinda thought

she might be dropping off to sleep, so they moved quietly away.

Mrs. Rhett's eyes opened then and she said: "Oh, Lorinda!"

"Yes, Mother."

"There's something I wish to mention—about my will."

"Your will?" the girl repeated with distaste. "Why talk about that—now of all times!"

"There may be no better time," Mrs. Rhett said. "As you know, my will is kept in the safe. It leaves this house and nearly all of my property to Hamilton."

"Let's not talk about it," Lorinda pleaded nervously. "At the time you made the will, we decided it was very fair."

"I thought so then, because you have substantial income in your own name. Hamilton, on the other hand, has nothing—scarcely a penny except his salary at the bank."

"You were right in leaving money to him, Mother. I never objected."

"The situation has changed now," Mrs. Rhett continued. "My husband may never return. If I should die suddenly, the estate would be left to him, but he might not appear to claim it. To my knowledge, he has no relatives. It could all become an awkward legal muddle."

"You certainly are borrowing trouble, Mother! Father will be found, and everything will be the same as before."

"I wish I could think so, Lorinda."

"Forget about the will."

Mrs. Rhett shook her head. "I think I shall change it. And soon. However, at this moment, I don't know how I wish to dispose of some of my property. Nearly everything I own is tied up in real estate."

The woman arose, and remarking that she had a severe headache, started into the house.

"I'll lie down for a little while," she murmured. "I feel so weak and tired."

Lorinda waited until her mother was well beyond hearing. Then she turned to Penny with stricken eyes.

"You heard what she said! She must have learned about that hideous doll from Celeste!"

"But how did Celeste know of it? You told her?"

"Oh, no! But Celeste has a way of knowing everything that goes on in this household. What ought I to do?"

"If I were in your place I would get rid of Celeste and Antón. Send them packing!"

The suggestion seemed almost shocking to Lorinda. "Oh, I couldn't do that," she answered. "In the first place, my stepfather would be furious if he returned and found them gone. Secondly, I doubt that they

would go on my orders. They're very independent."

"Then I don't see what you can do."

"If only my stepfather were here! Unless he returns soon I'm afraid something dreadful will happen to Mother. Did she look well to you?"

"Well—" Penny hesitated, and then said truthfully: "She seemed pale and listless. But one can understand that, considering what she has been through."

"I heard her give orders about her food this morning. She told Celeste she would have trays served in her room, and *no food is to be cooked with salt.*"

"Is that especially significant?"

"My stepfather once told me natives who believe a hex or *ouange* have been put on them are afraid to eat salted food. The salt is supposed to turn to poison in their bodies!"

Penny would have laughed had the matter not been so serious.

"Lorinda, you're as superstitious as a little savage!"

"I don't believe such a thing myself," the girl denied. "But Mother apparently does. She always was afraid of everything remotely connected with cult practices. She never wanted my stepfather to have books on the subject in the library, yet recently I saw her reading them."

"You said they disagreed about his interest in ancient cult practices?"

"Yes," Lorinda admitted. "Otherwise they got on

quite well together. Perhaps I shouldn't tell you this, but two days before he went away, they had a violent disagreement. Mother wanted to discharge Antón and Celeste, and he refused. Then on the last day my stepfather was seen, Mother went to the bank to talk to him. She never told me what happened there."

"According to Albert Potts, they had another quarrel."

"I shouldn't wonder," Lorinda sighed. "And now Mother's attitude toward Celeste is so changed—she actually clings to her. Oh dear, it's all so upsetting."

"You're trying to take too much upon your shoulders," Penny said kindly.

Conversation lagged. Lorinda could not throw aside the deep mood of depression which possessed her. Penny knew she no longer had an excuse to linger, yet she was unwilling to leave without asking a few questions about the thatched roof cottage.

"Lorinda, why did you try to keep me from visiting it the other day?" she inquired.

"Well, I didn't know you then. My stepfather's trophies all are kept in the cottage, and I didn't want anyone prying about."

"Then actually it's not a place of evil?"

Lorinda hesitated and answered indirectly: "I almost never go to the cottage myself. Once I was badly frightened there—it was nothing—but for a silly reason, I've always dreaded going back."

"You didn't by chance hear whispering from within the walls?"

Lorinda gave her companion a quick, startled look. "Why do you ask, Penny?"

"Because I visited the cottage yesterday with Salt Sommers. We distinctly heard a voice which seemed to come from the wall itself. When we went outside to investigate, the door slammed shut and locked."

"It has an automatic catch," Lorinda explained. "I never heard voices there, but I had a strange feeling when I was in the room—as if the walls had eyes and I was being watched."

"The cottage always is kept locked?" Penny inquired.

"Yes, my stepfather's trophies are valuable, and we can't risk having them stolen. How did you get inside?"

Penny had the grace to blush. "Well, to make a long story short, we went in through the window," she admitted. "It was a dreadful thing to do, and I'm heartily ashamed."

"I don't blame you," Lorinda laughed. "Naturally you were curious after I tried so hard to keep you away. Would you like to see the cottage again?"

"Indeed, yes!"

"I'll get the key," Lorinda offered.

She vanished into the house and was gone so long that Penny wondered what could be delaying the girl.

When she finally appeared on the veranda, her face was as dark as a rain cloud.

"The key is gone!" she exclaimed. "It's always been kept in the top drawer of the dresser in my stepfather's room. I couldn't find it anywhere."

"Perhaps he took it with him that last day he went to the bank," suggested Penny.

"Possibly," agreed Lorinda, though without conviction. "I hope nothing has been stolen from the cottage."

Alarmed at being unable to find the key, the girls walked hurriedly along the wooded path to the trophy house. From afar, Lorinda saw that the door was open a tiny crack.

"Either the place has been ransacked, or someone is there now!" she declared excitedly.

They approached swiftly but with noiseless tread. Lorinda suddenly flung open the cottage door.

The room was deserted. Trophies were exactly as Penny had seen them the previous day.

"That's funny," Lorinda commented, entering. "I was certain I'd find someone here. Perhaps you and your friend failed to lock the door after you left yesterday."

"It locked itself. We tried it, and couldn't get in. Anyway, even if we had left the door open, that still leaves the question of what became of the missing key."

Lorinda nodded thoughtfully as her gaze swept the room.

"Everything seems to be here," she remarked.

"What does the chest contain?" Penny inquired curiously. "Salt and I wanted to peek inside yesterday, but didn't have a chance."

"I'll show you," Lorinda offered.

Pulling out the chest, she raised the lid. The top compartment tray was empty. Looking a trifle puzzled, Lorinda jerked it from the wooden container. The lower section of the chest also was empty.

"Why, everything is gone!" she cried. "My stepfather kept an altar cloth, a feathered head dress, two carved knives, several rattles, and I don't know what all in this chest! They've been stolen!"

CHAPTER

14

STORM WARNINGS

PENNY DROPPED down on her knees beside Lorinda, peering into the empty wooden box.

"I hope you don't think Salt and I took anything when we were here," she murmured uncomfortably. "We never even opened the chest."

"Of course I know you didn't," Lorinda replied. "Such a thought never entered my mind. But it's disturbing to know these things are gone. Why weren't the other trophies taken also?"

"Possibly, because the person who stole them thought the objects inside the chest would not be so quickly missed."

Lorinda nodded as if in agreement, and closed the chest. As she straightened up, a tense, strained expression came over her face, and she stiffened.

"Listen!" she whispered.

From behind the walls of the house came a muffled dum—dum—dum of a drum. Even as the girls tensely listened, the sound died away.

"Could this cottage have a secret panel?" Penny asked in an excited voice.

"I don't think so." Badly frightened, Lorinda tried not to show it. "At least I never heard of one."

Penny began tapping the walls, none of which gave off a hollow sound. The section by the fireplace appeared somewhat thicker than the others. However, if it contained a moveable panel, she could not locate it.

Her gaze fell upon the cocoanut shell lamp, its bowl nearly exhausted of oil.

"Lorinda," she inquired, "is this room usually lighted?"

"Why, no."

"When Salt and I were here, we saw the cocoanut shell lamp burning. A little oil is left in it now."

"I can't imagine how it came to be there," Lorinda said in a hushed voice. "My stepfather may have filled it long ago, but he certainly never spoke of it."

Hurriedly the girls left the cottage, closing the door tightly behind them. Lorinda tested it twice to make certain the lock had caught.

"The sound of those drums—" she murmured. "Penny, did I imagine it?"

"I assure you, you didn't. I heard them too."

"Then the sound came from the beach," Lorinda declared firmly. "It couldn't have been otherwise. No one is anywhere around here."

"Let's go to the beach and look around," Penny proposed.

Almost at a run, they cut across the garden to the steps which led to the river's edge. Reaching the beach they paused to listen. No sound of drums could be heard and no one was in sight.

"It couldn't have come from here," Penny said. "Lorinda, that drumming definitely was tied up with the cottage."

"But the sound was muffled and far away."

"The cottage may have a passageway connection."

"I never heard of such a thing."

"How long ago was the cottage built, Lorinda?"

"The summer after Mother and my stepfather were married. I remember, Mother and I went away for a month to visit a cousin. When we returned, the cottage was finished. My stepfather ordered it done while we were away. Mother didn't like it one bit."

"Then you actually weren't here when the cottage was built? For all you know, a secret passageway or false panels in the walls, may have been put in?"

"I suppose it could have been done," Lorinda admitted reluctantly.

"Who would know about the cottage except your stepfather? Did you learn the builder's name?"

"I'm not sure there was one. I think my stepfather and Antón did most of the work themselves."

"Let's talk to Antón," suggested Penny. "Perhaps

he can shed light on the mystery of those whispering, drum-pounding walls!"

Antón, however, was nowhere to be found. After searching for him in the house and on the grounds, the girls abandoned the search.

By this time it was growing late, so Penny regretfully bade her friend goodbye, and returned home.

Try as she would, she could not forget the strange events of the afternoon, nor Mrs. Rhett's obsession that she would have a long and fatal illness.

"Even now that woman is mentally ill," she thought. "I do hope Lorinda calls in a doctor without delay."

Although removed from the depressing mansion atmosphere, Penny found it impossible to forget the effigy and the conviction Lorinda had of its powers.

"Dad," she said abruptly that night when dinner was over. "Do you believe in black magic?"

"I don't believe in any kind of magic, black, red, pink or green," he answered absently. "What's on your mind now?"

Penny told him of her adventure at the Rhett estate. She confidently expected her father to make light of the entire affair, but to her surprise he listened with flattering attention and asked many questions.

"It's fantastic!" he exclaimed when she finished. "Utterly fantastic! Yet I've read of cases where natives have been taken ill and although doctors declared not a thing was the matter with them, they

weakened and died. Is Mrs. Rhett an hysterical type of woman?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Then she may be in real danger! Obviously, something underhanded is going on at the mansion!"

Pulling himself out of a comfortable chair, Mr. Parker went to the hall closet for his hat, coat and cane.

"You're not going to the police station, are you, Dad?"

"No, I want to talk this over first with a man of my acquaintance who is better versed in cult practices and superstitions than anyone I know. He's Professor Kennedy of Riverview College. He spent many years in Africa, Egypt and along the Amazon river."

"May I go with you, Dad?"

"Come along," he invited. "You know all the facts, and I may get them mixed up."

Twenty minutes later Penny and her father were in the cozy study of Professor James Kennedy on Braemer Drive. An elderly man with a very soft voice, he greeted the Parkers cordially and displayed keen interest as they revealed the purpose of their call.

"I once met Mr. Rhett at a dinner party," Professor Kennedy remarked. "He is a highly intelligent gentleman and we had a very animated conversation."

"Did Rhett impress you as a man who might dabble

in black magic practice to gain his ends?" Mr. Parker inquired.

Professor Kennedy dropped a log on the fire before he answered. Considering his words carefully, he said:

"Undoubtedly, Mr. Rhett would have the knowledge, but he struck me as a man of unusual character. Suppose you explain more fully what you have in mind."

Professor Kennedy listened soberly as Penny recounted her many observations while at the Rhett mansion. He frowned slightly as she told how Mrs. Rhett had found the burnt match ends tied with scarlet string. When she disclosed how Lorinda and she destroyed the wooden doll, he no longer could remain silent.

"Indeed, you are correct in thinking someone may be trying to practice a little jungle magic!" he exclaimed. "Mrs. Rhett may be in grave danger unless we take counter-measures."

"But why should anyone seek to harm her?" Penny inquired. "You don't think she'll actually be physically hurt?"

"Her mind will be influenced—poisoned," the professor explained. "Oh, I don't mean a drug will be used, but there are subtle and just as effective ways. Now those burned match ends and the doll are only symbols, harmless in themselves, yet they are a means

by which Mrs. Rhett may be made seriously ill."

"Merely by the use of suggestion?"

"Yes."

"But it's all such nonsense!" Penny protested.

"To you—yes. But not to Mrs. Rhett. Tell me, does she know that the doll existed?"

"Yes, she learned about it—probably from Antón or Celeste."

The professor nodded. "The intended victim *always knows*," he declared. "By one means or another he is informed through those who seek his ruin. To be effective, the person must fear the mumbo-jumbo hocus pocus."

"Mrs. Rhett does fear it," Penny confirmed. "What's worse, she already believes herself marked for long illness. She actually looked ill today."

"She is mentally sick, and the symptoms will develop, unless counter-measures quickly are adopted."

"What do you advise, Professor?" asked Mr. Parker. "Perhaps if Mrs. Rhett were sent away from Riverview for a short while—"

"It would be of no avail, for the basic belief that she is ill would remain in her mind. No, this thing must be plucked out at the root. The doll has been burned. That is good! Now the one who seeks to will this sickness upon Mrs. Rhett must be found and confronted with his crime."

"We don't know who is behind it," said Mr. Parker. "I read in the papers Mr. Rhett has vanished. How-

ever, I wonder, is it not possible he actually is still in Riverview?"

"But you said yourself, Mr. Rhett doesn't appear the type of man to do such a ghastly thing," broke in Mr. Parker.

"So I did, but we dare not close our eyes to such a possibility. I believe you mentioned two servants, Antón and Celeste, who also are versed in cult practices, no doubt."

"Celeste is the one I suspect!" cried Penny. "But she has no good reason for hating Mrs. Rhett who seemingly always has been kind to her."

"Regardless, my advice is that the two servants be watched closely. And when the guilty person is found, as he must be, ordinary threats or punishments are likely to prove useless in dealing with him. He must be fought with his own superstitious weapons."

Mr. Parker and Penny talked on and on with the professor whose discussion of the effects of auto-suggestion only served to heighten their anxiety regarding Mrs. Rhett. When they left the house at midnight, Penny was deeply depressed.

"It's all very well for the professor to say 'find the guilty party and fight him with his own weapons,'" she declared, "but how can we do it? In the first place, Lorinda is our only contact with the Rhett household."

"Secondly, we're not gifted in all this hocus-pocus. It's a case for the police," added her father.

"But we have no proof of anything," Penny pointed out.

"True," agreed her father. "I may talk to the police chief about it. Meanwhile, we're interested in keeping abreast of developments for the *Star*. If you're sent out there again, be watchfully alert, but say nothing to Lorinda or anyone else about your suspicions. The case could take an ugly turn. In that event, I don't want you involved."

"It's fun working on the story, Dad. But I also want to help Lorinda and especially her Mother."

Penny realized her father had given excellent advice, and made up her mind to follow it. She became thoughtfully silent as they motored home.

"Wonder what the news is tonight?" Mr. Parker remarked, halting the car at a street corner to buy a newspaper.

Glaring headlines occupied the front page. Mr. Parker's first thought was that the missing banker had been found. He snapped on the interior car light to read the banner.

His stunned silence as he stared at it, caused Penny to peer over his shoulder. The lead story was not about Mr. Rhett's mysterious disappearance. Instead, the bold black type proclaimed:

"STORM WARNINGS POSTED. RIVERVIEW BELIEVED TO BE IN PATH OF APPROACHING HURRICANE!"

CHAPTER

15

MRS. RHETT'S ILLNESS

NEWS THAT a violent storm was sweeping toward Riverview held the front pages throughout Monday, and became almost the only topic of conversation on the streets.

Skies remained sunny, however, and presently fears were somewhat quieted by national wire service reports that the hurricane was believed to be veering eastward. Government observers now were quoted as predicting only the edge of the hurricane would strike the coast, and inland states might escape unscathed.

Accordingly, business went on much the same as usual. Lulled by the knowledge that never in the history of Riverview had a hurricane struck, the citizens now and then glanced at the falling barometer, but otherwise gave the matter little thought.

Although the disappearance of Hamilton Rhett had been crowded completely from the front pages, Penny did not lose interest in the case. Twice she

telephoned the mansion, only to receive no response. She did not visit the estate, for Editor DeWitt kept her busy with special assignments.

After school Tuesday, Penny was sent to the Hanover Steamship Co. offices to interview a tugboat captain. Enroute she ran into Louise Sidell. Her chum regarded her accusingly.

"A great pal you turned out to be, Penny Parker! Remember—you left me standing at the door of the First National."

"I'm terribly sorry, Lou," Penny apologized. "I was inside much longer than I expected to be and when I came out, you were gone."

"You never even telephoned to tell me what happened, you egg! I read all about it in the papers."

"You may have read part of the story, but not all," Penny corrected. "I called for you on Sunday when you were out, and since then I've been busier than a hop toad. Right now I'm on my way to the steamship office. Want to come along?"

"I suppose it's the only way I'll get any information out of you," Louise grumbled, falling into step.

As they walked toward the docks, she asked leading questions and, by the time they reached the steamship offices, had gleaned most of the story.

"So you believe Mr. Rhett may be somewhere in Riverview?" she mused.

"Jerry and I thought so at first, but we've nearly

abandoned the idea. The only clue we uncovered led to a dead end."

Pausing near the tugboat office, the girls stood for a moment watching waves pound against the docks. A chill, persistent wind had sprung up which penetrated their light clothing.

"B-r! It's getting colder!" Louise shivered, huddling close to Penny. "Maybe that storm the newspapers predicted is heading in this direction after all!"

Entering the tugboat office, the girls sought Captain Dolphin. The genial old fellow had been interviewed so many times that he knew the story of his life almost by heart and recited it with great gusto. Penny took a few notes and arose to leave.

"What do you think of the weather, captain?" she inquired casually.

His answer surprised her. "We don't like the look of 'er here," he said, frowning. "Barometer's been falling all day. I'm callin' in all my tugs off the river."

"Then you believe the storm actually may strike here?"

"We're not takin' any chances," replied the captain. "Once when I was a young twirp shippin' on a freighter, a hurricane struck us off the Florida Keys. We made port, but it was by the skin of a shark's tooth! Never want to see another storm like that one!"

Penny pocketed her notebook, and the girls went

outside into the rising wind. More conscious now of its icy bite, they huddled for a moment in the shelter of the office doorway.

Only a few doors away stood the Hartmann Steamship Company offices, whose large river boats plied up the Coast and on to distant world ports.

Through the plate glass window of the ticket office, Penny's attention was attracted to a slightly stooped man in rumpled clothing who was talking to the man in charge. He turned slightly, and as she saw his profile, she was struck by his remarkable resemblance to the newspaper photograph of Hamilton Rhett.

"Lou, see that man in the ticket office!" she exclaimed. "Doesn't he look like the missing banker?"

Louise studied the stranger a moment and replied: "How should I know? I've never seen him."

"Surely you saw the picture the *Star* published!"

"Yes, but I didn't pay much attention."

The man now was leaving the ticket office. Impulsively, Penny stepped forward to intercept him. "I beg your pardon—" she began.

Alert, wary eyes bore into her own as the stranger gazed straight at her for an instant. He said nothing, waiting for her to continue.

"Aren't you Hamilton Rhett?" Penny asked, deciding to make a direct approach.

"No, you are mistaken," the man replied.

Pushing past Penny, he went hurriedly on down the street.

"You see!" commented Louise. "That's what you get for jumping to such rash conclusions!"

Penny, however, was far from convinced that she had made a mistake.

"If that man wasn't Mr. Rhett, it was his double! Lou, did you notice if he wore a serpent ring?"

"He kept both hands in his pockets."

"That's so, he did!" agreed Penny. "Wait here for me! I'll ask the ticket agent a few questions!"

She was inside the office perhaps five minutes. When she returned, visibly excited, she glanced anxiously up the street. The stranger had vanished from view down the short street, apparently having turned at the first corner.

"We must overtake him!" Penny cried. "I have a hunch we let Mr. Rhett pull a fast one!"

Hurriedly, the girls walked to the corner. The stranger was nowhere to be seen. Whether he had disappeared into a building, down an alley or another street, they had no way of knowing. Penny stopped two pedestrians to inquire, but no one had noticed the man.

"We've lost him!" she exclaimed to Louise. "How disgusting!"

"What did the ticket man tell you, Penny?"

"That the man was inquiring about steamship ac-

commodations to New Orleans, and on to South America. He didn't give his name."

"Then how can you be sure it was Mr. Rhett?"

"It's only a hunch. But the agent said the man was wearing a ring—he didn't notice the type."

"Any number of men wear rings," Louise scoffed. "Penny, aren't you indulging in a little wishful thinking? You want to find Mr. Rhett so badly you're letting your imagination run riot."

"Maybe you're right," Penny admitted with a sigh. "Anyway, we've lost the fellow, so we may as well forget it."

Saying goodbye to Louise, she hastened off to the *Star* office to write up the interview with the tugboat captain. However, she could not put her mind on her work, and after making three false starts, she decided to postpone the story until after dinner.

Fortified by a good meal, she wrote the story much easier, but Penny was far from satisfied when she turned her finished copy in at the desk.

"Guess I'm off the beam tonight," she remarked to Jerry. "It took me an age to write that story."

Penny glanced at the clock. Time had passed swiftly for it was now after nine.

"You look tired," observed the night editor. "There's nothing more for you to do. Why don't you skip out?"

"Guess I will," agreed Penny, reaching for her hat.

"I have a geometry test coming up tomorrow."

She was through the swinging barrier, and half way down the hall when Jerry called to her: "Telephone for you, Penny."

With a sigh, she returned to take the call. Weariness vanished and she became wide-awake as she recognized Lorinda Rhett's voice at the other end of the line.

"Miss Parker?" the girl inquired in an agitated voice.

"Speaking."

"I'm sorry to bother you," Lorinda went on, "but could you possibly come to our house right away?"

"Why, I think so," Penny said, instantly divining that something was amiss at the mansion. "Is anything wrong?"

"Oh, yes! Everything! I can't tell you over the phone. Just come as quickly as you can. I need your help."

After hanging up the receiver, Penny related the conversation to the night editor. "I don't know exactly what the call means," she added. "Possibly, Lorinda has learned something about her missing stepfather. If so, it should make a good story!"

"Give us a ring from the mansion if anything develops," the night editor instructed. "Better take Jerry along with you. No telling what may turn up."

Jerry already was on his feet, reaching for his hat. His car was parked on the street. Traffic flow had

dwindled, enabling them to reach the mansion in record time.

The lower floor of the Rhett home was dark, but on the second floor, nearly all the rooms were ablaze with light.

"Wonder what's up!" mused Jerry, parking the car across the street.

"Lorinda is expecting me alone," Penny said. "Maybe it would be better for you to wait here until I have a chance to talk to her."

"Sure. Just signal if you need me."

Jerry switched off the car lights and settled himself for a lengthy vigil.

Penny ran up the walk and pounded on the door. In a moment, she heard footsteps; the living room light flashed on; then the door was opened by Lorinda.

"Is anything the matter?" Penny inquired anxiously.

"It's Mother," Lorinda explained. "She's very ill. We have the doctor now. I'm dreadfully worried."

Penny, at a loss to understand how she could be of help, nodded sympathetically.

"Come with me upstairs," Lorinda requested. "I want you to see and talk to Mother, and then tell me what you think."

"What seems to be the trouble?"

"She refuses food and she has rapidly failed since you last saw her. I've tried to reason with her, but it

is useless. She is convinced she has a fatal illness and will die!"

Deeply troubled, Penny followed Lorinda upstairs to the luxuriously furnished bed chamber. Celeste, in white starched uniform, was hovering anxiously over the bed where Mrs. Rhett lay. Lorinda's mother looked ten years older than when Penny had last seen her. Her face was pale and shriveled, her eyes listless.

"I don't want the food!" she said peevishly to Celeste, pushing aside a spoonful of custard which was held to her lips. "It is useless to eat."

On the other side of the bed stood a stout, middle-aged man whom Lorinda introduced as Doctor Everett, a specialist.

"Mrs. Rhett," he said sternly, "you are acting very foolish in refusing food. I have made a careful examination and can find nothing whatsoever the matter."

"I didn't call you to this house," the woman retorted. "Please go away and leave me alone. One has a right to die in peace."

"You will not die," said the doctor patiently. "Your illness is only a fancy of the mind."

Mrs. Rhett tossed her head on the pillow. "Go away!" she ordered. "It was my daughter who called you here—not I. No doctor can be of the slightest aid to me."

"Not unless you are willing to cooperate. Now I suggest that a trained nurse be called in to—"

"A trained nurse!" cried Celeste, straightening from the bedside. "Only I will tend my mistress! We will have no stranger in the household!"

"I want Celeste," agreed Mrs. Rhett, clinging to the servant's hand. "She is the only one who understands my ailment. Celeste will take care of me—no one else."

The doctor shrugged. "Very well, it was only a suggestion. I should like to help you, but under the circumstance, there is nothing I can do. Good evening."

As the doctor reached for his black bag, Lorinda moved quickly across the room. Her eyes pleaded with him to understand.

"Doctor Everett, you'll come again tomorrow?" she requested.

He smiled, but shook his head. "You might call Doctor Fellows, a psychiatrist," he advised. "There is nothing I can do."

While Lorinda accompanied the doctor to the front door, Penny remained in the bedroom. No sooner had the physician left than Celeste moved close to the bed, muttering:

"Good! He is gone! Only a fool would believe a doctor could help you. Until the *ouange* is broken, food will only turn to poison in your body! You will weaken and die. But Celeste will save you—Celeste will find a way to break the evil spell."

CHAPTER

16

AN OPEN WINDOW

UNMINDFUL OF Penny, Celeste bent lower over her bed-ridden mistress, whispering words into her ear.

"Celeste! What are you saying?" Penny demanded. "Why, you're putting dangerous ideas into Mrs. Rhett's mind!"

The servant whirled toward her angrily. "Go away!" she ordered. "My mistress does not want you here!"

"Celeste!" reproved Mrs. Rhett, but in a mild voice.

Penny stood her ground, stubbornly determined that a servant should not order her away. For a moment she and Celeste measured each other with steady gaze. Nothing more was said. Mrs. Rhett sighed, closed her eyes, and seemed to drowse.

Lorinda came bounding up the stairs two at a time. Unaware that anything unpleasant had transpired during her absence, she said with forced cheerfulness:

"Now, Mother, let's have no more nonsense.

You're to eat your food without fuss. Here, let's try the custard again."

Mrs. Rhett pushed away the spoon. "No, Lorinda, it is useless. But there is something you may do for me."

"Anything you wish, Mother."

"Bring pen and ink."

"Are you really strong enough to write a letter?"

"I intend to change my will. Lorinda, we spoke of this the other day. While I still have the strength I must revoke my former will and leave all my property to you."

"Oh, Mother, don't talk of such things! Why, the doctor says you're in perfect physical condition. You'll be up and around in another day or two. It's only worry about Father that has put you under the weather."

"I have made up my mind, Lorinda. The will must be changed—now—tonight, while I have the strength."

"Very well, if it will make you rest easier," Lorinda said reluctantly. "Celeste, bring ink, a pen and paper."

Celeste made no move to obey. "My mistress is not strong enough to write," she mumbled.

"Mother wishes to change the will. Please bring the materials."

"To change the will while one lies on a sick bed is to invite great trouble."

"Celeste! No more of such talk! Do as you are told!"

Penny thought the servant would refuse to obey, but she shuffled off. Many minutes passed before she returned with the requested materials.

Lorinda sat down at the bedside, and wrote at her Mother's dictation. It was a simple will in which Mrs. Rhett left all of her property to her daughter.

"If I thought my husband ever would return, I would want him to receive all my holdings," she said. "As it is, I think the money should go to you, Lorinda."

Penny was tempted to speak of her own belief that Mr. Rhett might be alive and in the city. However, realizing she had not a scrap of proof, she wisely remained silent.

Mrs. Rhett signed the will. Lorinda and Penny then added their names as witnesses to the document.

"Lock the will in the safe," Mrs. Rhett instructed her daughter. "Do it now, before you forget."

"Yes, Mother."

Seemingly relieved that the matter had been accomplished, Mrs. Rhett turned over in bed and tried to sleep. Leaving Celeste to look after her, Penny and Lorinda went downstairs to the study.

"Celeste seemed to be displeased because your mother changed the will," Penny remarked.

"Yes, Celeste has become a problem. I feel the doctor was right in suggesting a nurse for Mother. Celeste *may* mean well, but she is a distinct influence for the worse."

"Then why not get rid of her?"

"How?"

"Tell her to go."

Lorinda laughed shortly. "You don't know Celeste if you think she would take such an order from me!"

"Then have your mother dismiss her."

"I'm not sure she would do it. Furthermore, Celeste might defy her too. She has the idea she'll take orders only from my stepfather."

"I believe you're actually afraid of the woman," Penny commented.

"In a way I am," Lorinda admitted. "Mother used to dislike her intensely. Strangely, since she has become ill, she seems to depend more upon Celeste than she does upon me."

"Did it ever occur to you that Celeste might deliberately be planting ideas in your mother's mind?"

"Yes, I've thought of it. I don't believe Celeste would be evil enough to do it on purpose, but she is highly superstitious. I wish she were out of the house."

"You could get rid of her if you really wanted to. Just call in the police, and have them take over."

"I couldn't do that. Mother would never forgive me."

The girls entered the study, and Lorinda switched on a light. After pulling the blinds, she removed the wall picture, and prepared to open the safe.

Before she could spin the dials, footsteps padded on the stairway. Celeste appeared suddenly in the study doorway.

"Come quick!" she pleaded. "Mistress much worse!"

Lorinda dropped the will on the table, and with Penny close at her heels, followed Celeste up the stairway. Expecting the worst, they peered anxiously at Mrs. Rhett. She was tossing restlessly, but otherwise appeared the same as when they had seen her a few minutes ago.

"How do you feel, Mother?" Lorinda asked.

"Just the same," Mrs. Rhett replied listlessly.

Lorinda gazed questioningly at Celeste.

"Mistress much better now," the servant said. "She had sinking spell while you were downstairs."

"I'm afraid you imagined it, Celeste," Lorinda replied severely. "This really proves that we should have a trained nurse. Otherwise, you'll frighten us all out of our wits."

Celeste started to make a retort, but just then Mrs.

Rhett spoke: "Lorinda, did you put the will in the safe?" she asked.

"I was doing it when Celeste called. I'll attend to it right away."

Lorinda stooped to kiss her mother and offer a glass of water which was declined. She then went downstairs once more with Penny.

"What do you suppose possessed Celeste to frighten me so?" she remarked thoughtfully. "Did Mother seem changed to you?"

"Not a particle."

Reaching the study, Lorinda went directly to the table where she had left the signed will. The paper was not there.

"Why, Penny, what did I do with it?" she demanded in bewilderment. "I was certain I left it here."

"I distinctly recall that you did," Penny replied, her gaze wandering to an open window where a curtain fluttered in the breeze. "Lorinda, I think while we were away, someone came in from outside and took the will!"

CHAPTER

17

THE STOLEN WILL

PENNY DARTED to the open window, peering out onto the dark street. No one was in sight, although Jerry's car with dimmed headlights still stood at the curb.

"Who could have taken the will?" Lorinda wailed. "I'm sure it didn't blow out the window and it didn't sprout legs and walk off either!"

"Perhaps Celeste—"

"She was upstairs all the time we were out of this room," Lorinda interrupted.

"It seemed odd she called us just at the moment she did—particularly when your mother had not suffered a relapse."

Lorinda did not appear to hear Penny's remark. Half doubting that the paper could be missing, she searched on the floor near the safe, under the window and in every corner of the room.

"I suspect someone deliberately stole that will!"

Penny said with conviction. "Wait here! I may be able to learn more about it!"

Hastening outdoors, she gazed about the grounds. No one was in sight. She went directly to the press car. The automobile was deserted.

"Now what became of Jerry?" she asked herself impatiently. "Just when I need him!"

Disappointed, she turned toward the house again. Then she saw the reporter coming up a dark path from the direction of the beach.

"Jerry!" she called softly.

"Hi, Penny!" he returned. "Ready to go?"

"Oh, no! Everything is in a dreadful mess here. Lorinda's mother is very sick. She made a will, and Lorinda started to put it in the safe. Then we were called out of the room by the housekeeper, and when we returned, the paper was gone!"

"When did that happen, Penny?"

"Just now."

"Then that fellow I chased must have been the thief!"

"You saw someone take the will, Jerry?"

"I was sitting in the car," the reporter related. "A light was on in one of the downstairs rooms, but I was too sleepy to pay much attention. Suddenly though, I saw a man who apparently had been hiding in the shrubbery, rise up and climb through an open window."

"A man! Could you see who it was?"

"No, it was too dark. I jumped out of the car, but before I could cross the yard, the fellow climbed out through the window again, and started off. I called to him. He covered his face and ran. I chased him, but the fellow ducked down a path and I lost him."

"He must have stolen the will, Jerry! But how did he know about it, and why would it be of any value to him? Everything is so mixed up!"

"Maybe we ought to give the police a buzz."

Penny nodded. "I'll see what Lorinda wants to do," she replied. "Until now, the Rhetts have studiously avoided telling their troubles to the police—in fact, I am afraid Mrs. Rhett hasn't told everything she knows about her husband's disappearance."

"I'll wait in the car," Jerry said.

Penny let herself into the house again and made her way through the dark living room to the library where a light burned.

"Lorinda—" she began, only to stop short.

For it was not Lorinda who stood with her back toward the door, awkwardly turning the dials of the wall safe. Instead, Celeste whirled around, plainly dismayed by the girl's unexpected appearance in the doorway.

"Celeste!" Penny said sharply. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing," the woman muttered, her mouth sullen.

"You were trying to get into that safe! Is it the will you want, or are you after the Zudi drum?"

Penny's words, shot blindly, struck the target. Celeste's eyes flashed and she advanced a step toward the girl.

"You go away from here! Never come back!" she ordered harshly.

"Sorry, I'm not taking orders from you, Celeste. Why do you hate Lorinda and Mrs. Rhett? What is your little game?"

Celeste glared at Penny. She drew in her breath and expelled it with a hissing sound through her yellow, crooked teeth. Her hand clutched at an object hidden beneath her uniform and worn around her neck on a dirty cord.

With no warning, she broke into a jargon which Penny could not understand. But the meaning was clear enough even if the words were unintelligible. Celeste was calling down all manner of evil upon her head!

"Go!" Celeste cried in English. "You come here again—harm befall you!"

"Celeste, all your jungle hocus pocus doesn't impress me in the least. I'll leave when I feel in the mood—not before. What were you after in the safe?"

The woman's eyes met Penny's defiantly. She reached out as if to strike her, but at that moment

footsteps padded on the stairway. Pushing past Penny, Celeste retreated to the kitchen.

Lorinda came into the library, gazing about curiously. "Thought I heard voices," she commented.

"You did. Celeste was here. Guess what? I found her tampering with the wall safe."

"She may have been trying to learn if the Zudi drum was stolen," Lorinda said absently. "I'm far more worried about the will. What became of it?"

Penny repeated what Jerry had witnessed, adding: "Obviously the will was taken by the man who climbed through the window. Could it have been Antón?"

"Antón? Why, I doubt that he even knew about the will, because Mother decided to change it at a moment's notice. What reason would he have for taking it? Neither he nor Celeste figured in the terms of either document."

"It seemed to me Celeste was tremendously interested," Penny said. "Oh, well, the loss shouldn't be of serious consequence. Your mother can draw up another will."

"That's exactly what she won't do. I told her about the will being taken, Penny. She immediately decided it was another omen—a sign that she should leave everything the way it is."

"How foolish! Celeste must have put those notions in her head!"

"I'm sure I don't know. As for the will, I never did encourage her to change it, because not for a moment do I believe she is sick enough to die. I don't want Mother's money. I only want her to get well and strong and be happy again. Penny, you don't think she is seriously ill?"

"The doctor said nothing is the matter with her."

"Yet we both know something dreadful is wrong." Lorinda's finger tips nervously tapped the table edge. "Oh, Penny, I'm scared—terribly scared. I don't explain it, but I just *feel* a sinister something in the air!"

"You shouldn't be here alone with Celeste and Antón. Why not override them and hire a nurse or companion for your mother?"

"Maybe I will," Lorinda agreed. "I'll think it over until tomorrow."

"You'll report the theft of the will to the police, of course?"

"No," Lorinda decided instantly. "They would only ask embarrassing questions."

"Why are you so reluctant to take anyone into your confidence?"

"We're in enough trouble now, Penny. Please, let's not talk about it any more until tomorrow."

Decidedly puzzled by Lorinda's attitude, Penny said goodbye and rejoined Jerry in the car. He had seen no more of the mysterious prowler and was convinced the man had fled the estate.

"Let's go," he said, starting the car.

As the automobile swung down the driveway, Penny peered intently at the roadside shrubbery. The bushes were crashing back and forth in the rising wind, but no one was visible anywhere near the estate. Chilled, she closed the car window.

"Do you think that hurricane really is heading our way?" she asked her companion.

"Didn't see the government report tonight," Jerry replied. "Probably at the last minute, the storm will veer off and we'll escape. Riverview never was struck by a hurricane. Too far inland."

The car purred smoothly on, following the road which curled toward the beach. Penny became silent. As they turned a corner, Jerry reached out to give her hand a friendly squeeze.

"Why so quiet, kitten?" he teased.

"Just thinking, Jerry. There are so many things about the Rhett case I can't understand."

"Why trouble your little brain?"

"Because this isn't just an ordinary story to me, Jerry. I like Lorinda, and I feel that unless something is done, her mother may die."

"Don't tell me you're becoming a superstitious little heathen!"

"Certainly not! But from what the professor told us, it's a mistake to underrate the power of suggestion. Mrs. Rhett is in real danger—"

Penny broke off, listening intently.

"What was that, Jerry?" she demanded.

"Didn't hear anything. Only the wind."

"No, I distinctly heard a sound like the throb of a drum!" Penny lowered the car window. "There it is again!"

This time Jerry, too, heard the sound, far away and indistinct. "You're right!" he exclaimed, slowing the car. "From down the beach!"

Penny grasped his arm excitedly. "Stop the car!" she exclaimed. "If we can find the drummer, we may be able to solve part of the mystery!"

CHAPTER

18

THROUGH THE WINDOW

JERRY SLAMMED on the foot brake and the car came to a jerky halt at the curb. Leaping out, they stood for a moment listening.

"Don't hear anything now!" the reporter muttered.

"Let's take a gander down the beach," Penny proposed. "The sound seemed to come from that direction."

Hand in hand they cut across a vacant lot where dead weeds came waist high, then followed a sloping path to the beach. The long stretch of sand was deserted.

"We must have imagined those drums," Jerry said, pausing. "Or maybe it was the Legion fife and drum corps having a night practice."

"It was the beat of a jungle drum." Penny turned to gaze toward the Rhett mansion on the wooded hillside. All the windows, save one in an upstairs bedroom, now were dark.

By the light of a three-quarters moon which was

rising over the pines, she could see the wooden steps that led from the estate down to the beach. On either side extended tiers of twisted limestone rock. It occurred to Penny that somewhere among the crannies, a cave might be tucked away. She spoke of it to Jerry.

"Maybe," he agreed, "but I never heard of one around here."

A gust of wind caught Penny's felt hat, carrying it cartwheeling down the beach. She and Jerry raced in pursuit, colliding as they pounced on it together. They laughed, and as the reporter pulled the hat over Penny's flying hair, he kissed her quickly on the cheek.

Then before she could reprimand him, he exclaimed: "Wow! That wind really is getting strong! Let's get back to the car before we blow away!"

Penny liked Jerry and she liked the kiss. Best of all, she appreciated his consideration in never forcing serious attentions upon her. With a gay "I'll race you!", she ran ahead of him to the road.

Jerry took Penny directly home. Mrs. Weems had gone to bed while Mr. Parker had not returned from downtown.

"Will you come in and have a cup of chocolate?" Penny invited the reporter.

"Not tonight, thanks," he declined. "See you tomorrow at the office."

Penny went into the house, and after fixing herself a snack from the refrigerator, switched on the radio to catch the weather report. The news commentator, on a national hookup, warned that the hurricane continued to sweep toward the Atlantic coast, and that inland cities also were endangered.

"It really sounds serious," she thought, turning off the radio.

As she went upstairs, Mrs. Weems called to her in a sleepy voice, so Penny stepped into the housekeeper's bedroom for a moment.

"I'm glad you're home," Mrs. Weems said. "Is there any news about the approaching storm?"

"Nothing definite. The latest radio report said it's still heading this way."

"When will it strike?"

"Late tomorrow unless it veers off. It may be quite serious," Penny said.

Mrs. Weems sighed and settled beneath the covers again. "If it isn't one thing it's another! First thing in the morning we must get the awning down, and have all the shutters taken off."

"If the center of the hurricane should hit here, everything will go," Penny said cheerfully. "So why worry about shutters?"

"The storm may be a severe one, but I don't believe it will strike with hurricane force," Mrs. Weems insisted. "In any case, the shutters are coming down,

and I'll need your help! So don't try to skip out in the morning!"

Penny went to her own room, but before she could undress, she heard her father's car on the driveway. He came into the house, locked the doors for the night, then climbed the stairs.

"Hello, Dad!" she called through the half open door of her bedroom. "Any news?"

"There will be by morning," he answered grimly. "The *Star* is coming out with front page headlines warning the city to prepare for the worst!"

Penny stepped quickly out into the hall.

"Then Riverview is in the path of the hurricane! Is there danger that the city will be destroyed?"

"Damage to property is almost certain to be extensive. I've just come from a meeting with the mayor and City Council. While there's an outside chance the city may be spared, it's folly not to prepare for the full brunt of the storm. The mayor has issued a proclamation declaring an emergency and advising everyone to keep off the streets after noon tomorrow. Most businesses will close."

"Then the *Star* will shut down too?"

"No. At such a time, folks depend more than ever upon their newspaper for accurate information. We'll publish as long as we have a plant and our trucks can keep delivering."

Mr. Parker's information brought home to Penny the true seriousness of the situation. However, as she peered out of her bedroom window a few minutes later, the clear sky and bright stars belied an approaching storm.

Undressed, Penny sat for a time propped up in bed with pillows, trying to read a book. The words held little meaning. Losing interest, she snapped off the light, and snuggled down.

But she could not sleep. The dark house was filled with many strange sounds. The stairway creaked, the shutters rattled, and in the bathroom, water dripped regularly from a faucet.

Thoughts raced rampant through Penny's mind. She squirmed and tossed and became increasingly aware of the rising wind.

Suddenly she was startled by a loud crash in the yard below. Leaping out of bed, she darted to the window. A large rotten tree limb had been ripped from the backyard maple and now lay across the driveway.

"Dad will have to move it before he can get the car out of the garage in the morning," she thought. "Some fun!"

Creeping back beneath the covers, she tried again to sleep. Instead, she found herself thinking over everything that had occurred at the Rhett mansion.

Already the banker's disappearance was fading out of the newspapers, and with a hurricane in the offing, the story would be entirely forgotten.

"The police haven't shown much interest," she reflected. "Unless definite clues are obtained soon, Mr. Rhett may never be traced. The case will die."

Penny thought of the mysterious thatched roof cottage and the whispering voices.

"Those walls must have a secret panel," she reasoned. "I believe I might find it if I had an opportunity to make a thorough investigation!"

A flapping shutter reminded Penny once more of the storm. Then came the discouraging thought that even if only the tail-end of the hurricane struck Riverview, the flimsy thatched cottage undoubtedly would be carried away and destroyed.

"Unless I get out there tomorrow, I'll probably lose my chance!" she told herself. "Oh, dear, how will I make it when I have a thousand other things I'm supposed to do?"

Dancing tree limbs cast weird shadows on the rough plaster wall. Penny closed her eyes, but even then sleep would not come.

Suddenly the window pane crashed, and glass clattered onto the floor. Startled, Penny sat up and groped for the night table lamp. Her first thought was that a tree branch had hurtled against the pane, breaking it.

But as the light went on, she saw that only a small hole had been broken in the glass. On the floor, scarcely two feet from the bed, lay a small object wrapped in black cloth.

Penny rolled out of bed and gingerly picked it up. Carefully and with a feeling of revulsion, she untied the packet.

Inside were two black feathers, the wing of a bird, herbs which Penny could not identify, a bit of bone, and a small amount of damp earth.

There was no warning message, nothing to identify the one who had thrown the packet, yet Penny instantly knew its significance and from whence it had come.

"Either Antón or Celeste hurled it because I've cramped their style!" she thought. "Well, their little hex won't work! I'll use this evil charm to fashion their own undoing!"

CHAPTER

19

RISING WIND

THE SOUND of crashing glass brought both Mrs. Weems and Mr. Parker to the bedroom. They found Penny standing at the window, the light off, peering down into the yard.

"What's coming off here?" Mr. Parker demanded, his voice cross because he had been aroused from sound slumber. "Did something blow against the window?"

"This was thrown," Penny revealed, holding up the packet. "Dad, can you see anyone hiding in the shrubbery?"

Mr. Parker moved to the window, gazing intently about the yard.

"I don't see anyone."

"Whoever it was, he's probably gone now." Penny carefully drew the blinds before snapping on the overhead light. She handed the packet to her father.

"What's this, Penny?"

"It was thrown through the window. I suspect it's intended as a bad luck omen, and to frighten me. Evidently my work on the Rhett case is not appreciated."

"A jungle charm!" exclaimed Mrs. Weems, horrified. "Oh, Penny, I knew no good would come of your having anything to do with that queer family! Here, give that horrid thing to me—I'll burn it in the furnace."

"Not so fast," chuckled Penny. "I intend to keep it as evidence."

"But it may bring you bad luck."

"Why, Mrs. Weems, I'm surprised at you," teased Penny. "Surely you're not superstitious?"

"No," the housekeeper denied, "but from what you've told me about those queer Rhett servants, I distrust them. I don't want you even to touch that ugly package!"

"These objects aren't harmful," Penny insisted, selecting the bit of bone and offering it to Mrs. Weems. "Why attach special significance to them?"

With a shudder, the housekeeper backed away.

"Penny is right," declared Mr. Parker. "The packet is silly and has no meaning unless we build it up in our own minds. That, of course, is exactly what the one who hurled it intends us to do."

"Penny mustn't go to that dreadful place again!"

"Oh, Mrs. Weems! Don't you see, that's just what

Antón and Celeste hope to accomplish. If they can keep me away from the mansion merely by throwing one of their stupid charms through my window, their trick has been successful."

"I quite agree with Penny," Mr. Parker declared. "In fact, I may call at the mansion myself! I've become interested in Antón and Celeste—they're a very successful pair of bluffers."

"Oh, Dad! Will you go with me tomorrow?"

"Perhaps," he promised vaguely. "We'll see, when the time comes. I foresee any number of troubles far more serious than our concern with the Rhett family."

"With both of you against me, I'm only wasting my breath," Mrs. Weems sighed, drawing her robe tightly about her. "I may as well go to bed."

Penny put the black packet on the dresser after her father had finished inspecting it. "I intend to wear this charm around my neck the next time I go to the Rhetts'," she declared. "It will be fun to see how Celeste and Antón react."

"Don't carry your fun too far," her father advised. "While it's true this charm has no significance or supernatural power, Antón and Celeste may be dangerous characters. They'll bear watching."

"And I'm the one to do it," Penny chuckled. "I'm not a bit afraid of them, Dad. As you said, they're a couple of bluffers."

"I may have used the word ill-advisedly," the pub-

lisher corrected. "Don't make the mistake of underrating them. The case, as you well know, has sinister aspects."

"I'll be careful," Penny promised soberly.

After her father had returned to his room, she went back to bed. A chill wind whistled in through the hole in the window, but she burrowed deep beneath the blankets and soon was sound asleep.

Next morning, as Mr. Parker had predicted, newspapers carried screaming headlines, announcing that the hurricane might reach Riverview by nightfall. Householders were advised to take every precaution to protect life and property.

School opened and was promptly dismissed at nine o'clock. At home, Penny helped Mrs. Weems carry in the porch awning, remove the shutters and all loose objects which were likely to be torn free by the wind.

By now, papers were blowing wildly, cluttering the yard. Each gust brought sticks or small limbs crashing down into the street.

Mrs. Weems, hovering near the radio to hear the last-minute reports, declared that the barometer continued to fall.

"The storm is steadily getting worse," she said nervously.

After lunch, Penny went to the newspaper office to inquire if Mr. DeWitt had any special assignment for her.

"Nothing right now," he said, rapidly scanning a page of copy. "But stick around. Anything may break."

Penny waited, growing increasingly restless. She was certain DeWitt had forgotten all about her, when he slammed down a telephone receiver and glanced in her direction.

"Go out on the street and see what's doing," he ordered. "Might check the police station, too, on your way in."

Penny nodded and went out through the barrier gate. The feel of the approaching hurricane was in the air. Walking toward the river, she saw blue-green water boiling into sinister white foam where it vaulted onto the docks.

Pedestrians were few in number and all hurrying. Business was at a standstill. Shutters were going up over plate glass windows, and street signs were being taken down.

Penny wandered about for a time and then, as a fine rain began to fall, sought the police station. Checking routine reports, she noted four injury cases caused by flying objects, several thefts of property, and more than the usual number of automobile accidents.

At the office once more, she wrote an impressionist account of what she had seen, then waited for another assignment.

"Penny, you may as well go home while you can

get there," DeWitt said presently. "City Traction is shutting off service at six o'clock, and after that you won't be able to take a bus."

At another time Penny might have been disappointed to be sent home when exciting news was breaking, but dismissal now fitted neatly into her plans. She was determined to make one last investigation of the thatched roof cottage at the Rhett mansion. However, to beat the storm, she must move fast.

Going out the door, Penny met Jerry who had just come in from the river front. His felt hat was dripping wet.

"It's getting nasty outside," he remarked. "How are you going home, Penny? By bus?"

"Eventually, but not just now," she grinned. "First, I have a little errand at the Rhetts'."

"Better skip it," he advised. "This storm is the real McCoy."

"Can't afford to, Jerry. I want to look over that thatched cottage once more. If I don't do it now, it probably won't be there by tomorrow."

"If you're set on going out there, better make it a speedy trip," Jerry returned. "The storm is rolling in fast."

Reaching the mansion twenty minutes later, Penny was surprised to see an unfamiliar automobile parked on the Rhett driveway. As she went up the front walk, the door opened, and three men came outside.

Without noticing the girl, they entered the car and drove away.

"Wonder who they are and what brought them here?" Penny mused.

In response to her knock, Celeste opened the door. Seeing Penny, the woman tried to close it in her face, but the girl pushed boldly past her into the hallway.

Penny purposely had worn the black packet on a string around her neck. While Celeste was closing the door, she pulled it from her dress front, and then opened her raincoat so that the housekeeper could not fail to see the object.

Celeste's eyes instantly riveted upon the dangling packet.

"My good luck charm!" said Penny. "Someone gave it to me last night!"

Celeste's lips dropped apart to show her uneven teeth.

"It is an evil packet!" she hissed. "If you wear it, sickness and death will pursue you!"

"Not this cookie," chuckled Penny. "You see, I don't believe such nonsense. Whoever tossed this thing through my window went to a lot of trouble for nothing."

Celeste's face, an interesting study in mixed emotions, suddenly became a blank mask. Hearing footsteps, the woman mumbled something and scurried away.

Lorinda came down the stairway. "Oh, Penny!" she exclaimed, grasping her hand. "I'm so glad you came! We're in such trouble!"

"Your mother is worse?"

"Yes, she is failing rapidly, and the visit of those three bankers upset her dreadfully."

"The men I met on the walk?"

"Yes, they're members of the First National Bank board. They told Mother she must make up the $250,000 bond loss within forty-eight hours, or my stepfather will be exposed as a thief, and the estate sued! It seems Mr. Potts convinced them my stepfather had the bonds when he disappeared."

"What will your mother do?"

"What can she do? Nearly all of her property is in real estate. She might be able to raise $30,000 cash within the required time, but never the amount they demand."

"You've heard nothing from your stepfather?"

"Not a word. The police haven't contributed any worthwhile clues either. They didn't go deeply into the case."

"Can you blame them? You and your mother withheld facts and discouraged them at every turn."

"I know."

"Why did you do it?"

"I thought you understood," Lorinda answered in a low voice. "Mother and my stepfather quarreled

violently on that last day at the bank. She didn't want the truth to get out, so she tried to keep from answering questions."

"Then your stepfather disappeared as a result of the quarrel?"

"I don't know. It is a possibility."

"You believe your stepfather may have stolen the bonds?"

"Oh, no! Never! He may have had them on his person when he went away or was spirited off, but I am sure he is no thief!"

Shutters were flapping in the wind. The porch furniture had not been brought into the house, and through the window, Penny saw that many loose, breakable objects remained in the garden. Abruptly changing the subject, she said:

"Lorinda, the storm is getting worse every minute. Can't we bring in the porch furniture?"

"I told Antón to do it early this morning. He went off somewhere. Celeste has been no help either. They're both acting so independent."

"We don't need their help. Come! We can do it together."

Lorinda put on her rain cape and they went out onto the porch. Already the rug was rain soaked. They rolled it up and carried it to the basement, where they also took the furniture. Deciding it was too late to do anything about nailing down the shut-

ters or taking them off, they brought in loose objects from the yard.

In passing the library, Penny noticed that a window was open. The curtain was drenched and rain was pouring in upon the floor.

With a cry of dismay, she ran to close it. As she turned around, she saw at once that the wall safe was exposed to view, and open.

"Lorinda!" she called.

Her friend came quickly to the doorway. "Anything wrong?" she inquired.

Penny directed her gaze toward the safe. "Did you leave it open?" she asked.

"No!" With a startled exclamation, Lorinda darted across the room. She thrust her arm into the circular opening, and withdrew it empty.

"The Zudi drum is gone!" she announced. "It's been stolen!"

CHAPTER

20

TWELVE STEPS DOWN

THE NEWS did not astonish Penny for she had anticipated it. She said quietly:

"Lorinda, surely now you'll call in the police? The Zudi drum must be a very valuable trophy."

"It is. Yes, I suppose the only thing to do is notify police headquarters."

Lorinda went to a telephone, but although she tried many times, she was unable to contact the operator. "The line must be down," she reported. "The wire sounds dead."

"Then we're isolated here until after the storm. Lorinda, why don't you question Celeste and Antón?"

"It would be useless."

"Let me do it."

"Go ahead, but they'll not tell you anything," Lorinda said despairingly. "Antón and Celeste have been interested in the Zudi drum ever since they came here, but I've never known them to steal."

"Did they know the safe combination?"

"Not unless they learned it the last few days. I noticed that Celeste watches lately whenever anyone enters or leaves the library."

"Then she may have obtained the combination. I know she was tampering with the dial yesterday. Where is she now?"

"In the kitchen, I suppose."

Celeste, however, was not to be found there, nor was she in any of the upstairs bedrooms, or in her own room on the first floor adjoining the garage.

"I don't know where she and Antón went," Lorinda declared, deeply troubled. "I hate to accuse them without proof, but it does look as if they're the only ones who could have stolen the drum!"

"How about the trophies at the thatched roof cottage? Are they safe?"

"Let's find out," Lorinda proposed. "Wait, I'll get the key. Incidentally, it was mysteriously returned to my stepfather's room yesterday."

She returned with the key in a moment, and the girls ran down the slippery path through the falling rain. The whine of a steadily rising wind was in their ears as they opened the cottage door and stepped inside.

Lorinda looked carefully about. "Everything seems to be here—" she began, only to correct herself. "No, the crossed machetes which were on the wall! They're gone!"

"And the rattle!" exclaimed Penny. "Where is it?"

Lorinda pulled out the wooden chest and raised the lid. "The altar cloth is missing and any number of things! Almost everything has been taken!"

In the midst of checking over the few remaining objects in the chest, Lorinda suddenly raised her head.

"Listen!" she commanded.

At first, Penny could distinguish only the whistle of the wind, then she became aware of a low rumbling murmur which seemed to come from the very walls of the cottage.

"It's a chant!" whispered Lorinda. "I can hear drums too, as if from a long distance away!"

A little frightened, neither girl spoke for a while. The strange sound died away, then was resumed. This time they distinctly could hear the thumping of drums.

Penny went to the door of the cottage to listen. Outside there was only the whine of the wind and the crashing of tree branches.

"Lorinda, this cottage must have a secret passage!" she declared excitedly. "I thought so before, and now I'm certain of it!"

Already Lorinda was down on hands and knees before the fireplace, tapping the tiles. They gave forth a hollow sound. However, she could find no opening.

Penny removed a huge black kettle from hanging chains, and peered up into the chimney. Her groping hand encountered a rod which she assumed controlled the draft. She pulled on it. The floor beneath her feet suddenly gave way, and she would have pitched through the opening had not Lorinda seized her arms and held her.

Scrambling back to solid flooring, Penny peered down into the dark opening where the hearth had been. The tiles were only a sham, she saw now, fastened to a hinged rectangle of wood, which had fallen back like a trap door.

Steep stone steps led down into inky darkness.

"Why, I never dreamed this was here!" Lorinda whispered. "It must have been built that summer Mother and I were away!"

The sound of drums and incantations came plainly now. Neither Penny nor Lorinda was eager to investigate the passage. They feared that they might encounter something with which they would be unable to cope. But to retreat was equally unthinkable.

Penny found the cocoanut shell lamp and lit the floating wick. Moving ahead, she cautiously descended the stone steps. Lorinda kept close beside her.

Twelve steps led almost straight down. There the girls found themselves in a bricked-over passageway,

so narrow they could barely squeeze through. However, after they had gone a few yards, it widened a little.

"Where do you suppose this leads?" Penny whispered. "To the river?"

"Probably. It seems to me the sound of the drums came from that direction."

The weird noises no longer could be heard and the silence disturbed the girls. Could it be that in entering the tunnel they had revealed their presence? Nervous and tense, they moved forward at a snail's pace, feeling their way along the wall and taking care to make no betraying sound.

The tunnel led downhill. In places the roof was so low the girls were forced to bend double to pass through. The walls were damp and crumbly and, at points near the roof, water dripped steadily.

Then presently Penny halted, shifting the lamp to her other hand. The passage had widened into a tiny room from which two tunnels branched.

"Which shall we take?" she asked Lorinda.

They selected the wider of the two, which soon proved a deception. Scarcely had they left the little dugout than it narrowed until they were barely able to edge through.

"Shall we turn back and try the other?" Penny suggested.

Lorinda wanted to keep on. "We're moving up-

hill now," she pointed out. "I suspect this must lead either to the house or the road."

Her guess proved to be correct. Another twenty yards and the tunnel terminated abruptly in front of a door. It opened readily. A dozen roughly carved steps led upward to a trap door. Penny pushed it aside and blinking owlishly, climbed out into a bedroom.

She saw then that the trap door had been cut in the center of the room floor, hidden from view by a large rag rug which now lay in an untidy heap.

"Why, we're in Celeste's room!" Lorinda exclaimed as she too emerged. "Adjoining the garage!"

"This explains quite a few things to me," remarked Penny.

"And to me! Celeste must have known about this passage all the time, but she never hinted of it to Mother or me!"

"If you ask my opinion, Celeste not only has known about the passage, she's been using it regularly," declared Penny, gazing curiously about the room.

The bed had been carelessly made, and a red bandana handkerchief had been left hanging on one of the wooden posts. On the dresser were a number of objects which drew the girls' attention. From the pin tray Penny picked up a tiny black feather and there were strips of torn black cloth which exactly matched the packet she wore about her neck.

"This proves it!" she exclaimed. "Celeste made the evil charm which was thrown through my window last night!"

"Charm?" Lorinda inquired. "Penny, what are you talking about?"

Penny showed her the packet and explained how it had been hurled through the window pane. "I'm sure Celeste had Antón do it or perhaps she tossed it herself. At any rate, she made the packet to frighten me, only it didn't work."

"Unless Celeste can explain matters satisfactorily, I'll turn her over to the police!" Lorinda said angrily.

"Finding her may not be so easy now. Also getting her into police custody may take a little doing. I'm afraid we've waited too long, Lorinda."

"No, we'll find her!" Lorinda announced with determination. "After all, she doesn't know how much we have learned. Let's investigate the other passageway."

"All right," Penny agreed, "but this lamp isn't much good. We need a flashlight."

"I have one in my room. I'll get it, see if Mother is all right, and be right back."

Lorinda was gone less than five minutes. "Mother is sleeping, so it's safe to leave her," she reported. "Here's the flash, but I couldn't find an extra battery."

Descending into the passageway, the girls retraced their steps to the tiny dugout midway between the

thatched roof cottage and the mansion. As they entered the other tunnel, they again heard the throb of jungle drums, and the weird incantation of many gutteral voices.

"A chant to the Serpent God!" whispered Lorinda. "Do you hear that high-pitched drum which sounds above the others?"

Penny nodded as she moved forward in the dark, narrow passage.

"It is the Zudi," Lorinda added. "I would know its tone anywhere! We must recover it, but if what I think is so, it will be a dangerous task!"

CHAPTER

21

CEREMONIAL CAVE

THE TUNNEL sloped gently downward, apparently toward the river beach. As the girls moved along, the pulsing of the drums came with increasing crescendo. They could hear the wailing chant plainly now, an incantation in which many voices were united.

"Better switch off the light," Lorinda advised in a whisper. "We're getting close."

Penny darkened the flashlight, groping her way along the damp, rocky wall. The passage now had widened, and suddenly ahead, she saw the flickering flame of a torch.

In the shadowy light swayed a half dozen celebrants of the weird rites. The room was circular, a cavern carved from the rocks years before by the action of water.

Penny's gaze focused upon the dancing figures. Antón, barefooted and grotesque with a red turban wound about his head, led the procession, beating out

a rhythm and shaking the gourd rattle which had been stolen from the thatched cottage.

Behind him came a drummer Penny did not recognize, and three other dancers, who carried aloft a banner upon which were metallic, glittering serpentine symbols.

But it was Celeste, garbed in scarlet with an embroidered stole over her shoulders, who dominated the scene. Seated before an altar where two tall candles burned, she pounded out the basic rhythm on a long, narrow drum.

"The Zudi!" whispered Lorinda. "She stole it from the safe!"

"Let's make her give it up!"

"No! No!" Lorinda grasped Penny's arm, holding her back. "It would be folly to show ourselves now. Antón, Celeste and their stupid converts are hypnotized by their own music. If they knew we were watching their rites, there's no telling what they would do."

"Celeste is a cruel, dangerous woman."

"We'll turn her over to the police. I realize now it's the only thing to do."

Fascinated, the girls watched the strange sight. The drums were beating faster now, and at each boom of the Zudi, Antón leaped with frenzied glee rigid as an arrow into the air.

"Who are the others?" Penny whispered.

Lorinda shook her head. "No-good friends of Antón and Celeste probably," she returned. "Recruits from the slums of Riverview."

On the altar were many objects, a basket of bread, a basin of cooked fish, a carved wooden serpent and a wreath of feathers. A kettle contained a brew from which the dancers at intervals dipped with a gourd cup and drank.

Outside the cave, the wind howled an accompaniment to the wild ceremony, covering the shrill shrieks and savage laughter.

"We've seen enough of this!" whispered Penny. "Let's get the police and break it up!"

"All right," agreed Lorinda. "I hate to turn Antón and Celeste over to the authorities, but I'm convinced now they have reverted to heathen ways, and may even be responsible for Mother's sickness."

They started to retreat, making no sound. In the darkness Lorinda stumbled over a small rock. She made no outcry as she saved herself from a fall, but her shoes scuffed noisily and her body thudded heavily against the wall.

Instantly the Zudi drum ceased its rhythm. "What was that?" they heard Celeste ask sharply.

The girls huddled against the wall. An instant later, Antón, a torch in his hand, peered down the tunnel.

His cry told the girls they had been seen. In panic, they started down the passageway with Antón in hot pursuit. And close at his heels came Celeste and her followers.

Escape was impossible. Before the girls had gone a half dozen yards they were overtaken. Though they struggled to free themselves, Antón's grasp was like a steel bracelet upon their arms. They were half dragged back to the cave.

"Antón! Celeste! What is the meaning of this?" Lorinda demanded, seeking to regain control of the servants by sheer power of will.

She tried to shake herself free, but Antón did not release her. He awaited the word of his wife.

"Tie them up!" said Celeste harshly.

"Celeste, have you lost your mind!" Lorinda cried.

In the flickering light of the torch, the woman's face was like a rigid mask. Eyes burned with hatred; cheeks were deeply indrawn. Lorinda felt as if she were gazing upon a stranger, and suddenly was afraid.

"You dared to steal Father's drum!" she challenged.

"It is now my drum," retorted Celeste.

"You spied upon me many times until you learned the combination of the safe!" Lorinda accused.

Celeste did not deny the charge. She was burrowing behind the low altar and from the box-like structure drew forth a long stout cord. Severing it with

the blade of a sharp knife, she handed the two pieces to Antón who attempted to tie Lorinda's hands behind her.

The girl fought like a wild cat, and Penny, held by one of Celeste's followers, sought to free herself, but it was useless. She too was tightly bound and thrown down on the floor of the cave.

"Celeste, why are you doing this cruel thing?" Lorinda asked in a pleading tone. "Does it mean nothing to you that Father brought you here, fed you, clothed you—gave you many advantages?"

For a moment Celeste softened and seemed to hesitate. Lorinda was quick to press the advantage.

"My father and my mother have been very kind to you—"

Mention of her mother's name proved unfortunate. Celeste's face hardened into rigid lines again and she said furiously:

"I hate her! May her flesh rot away and her bones be torn asunder!"

"Celeste! And to think we ever trusted you! Mother is ill because you have willed it so—it was you who made the wicked effigy doll—you who kept planting in her mind the idea that she would become ill and die!"

"And I have the will too!" the woman said gleefully. "I told Antón to get it from the library! Then

I called you to your mother's room so he could snatch it from the table!"

"But why did you do it, Celeste? What have you gained?"

"You will not steal my master's money! The will is destroyed—burned!"

"Steal my stepfather's money? Indeed, you are out of your mind, Celeste! My stepfather has disappeared and may never be seen again."

"He lives."

"How do you know?" Lorinda cried eagerly.

"Celeste know—feel it here." The woman touched her breast.

"You've seen him—talked to him since he went away!" Lorinda accused.

"No!"

"Then unless you've had a message from him, you couldn't know whether he is alive or dead."

"Celeste know," the woman replied stubbornly. "We save the money for him."

"If my stepfather returns I'll be perfectly happy for him to have Mother's estate. You're all mixed up, Celeste. Now let's put an end to this nonsense. Free us!"

"No," retorted the grim woman. "Celeste and Antón go away now. Perhaps find master. You will stay in cave."

"Celeste, how did you know about this passage and cave?" Lorinda asked, stalling for time.

"Antón help build it."

"But why should my stepfather build the passageway?" Lorinda murmured. "It doesn't seem like him."

Celeste did not answer. Gathering up the machete, the Zudi drum, the embroidered altar cloth and other stolen treasures, she prepared to leave.

"It was you who whispered the warning at the thatched cottage!" accused Penny. "You wanted to prevent discovery of this cave!"

Celeste's cruel smile acknowledged the truth. Saying something to Antón in their own language, she padded off down the passageway.

All save Antón now had gone. He blew out the altar candles, picked up the pine torch and would have blown out the cocoanut shell lamp, had Penny not said pleadingly:

"Please leave us a tiny light, Antón. It will be so dark here in the cave."

The man hesitated, glancing down the passage as if fearful Celeste would punish him for such a display of weakness. But he did as Penny requested. First, however, he noted that the lamp was nearly empty of oil and could not burn many minutes. Without extinguishing it, he disappeared into the tunnel.

Waiting only until she was certain Celeste, Antón

and their converts were out of the passage, Lorinda said excitedly:

"They forgot to gag us! We can shout for help!"

"With a hurricane roaring outside, it's a waste of breath," replied Penny. "No one will be on the beach tonight, and our voices wouldn't carry a dozen yards."

"Then what are we to do? Antón and Celeste mean to run away now. The police never will be able to find them unless we act quickly.

"I have an idea, but it may not work."

Penny, her hands and feet securely tied, began to roll toward the cocoanut oil lamp.

"What are you trying to do?" Lorinda asked anxiously.

"Maybe I can burn the cords on my wrists. That's why I asked Antón to leave the lamp."

"Perhaps you can!" cried Lorinda, taking hope. "But it will be dangerous and very hard to do. The oil is almost gone. You'll have to work fast, Penny, or you'll lose your chance!"

CHAPTER

22

STRANGER IN THE STORM

PENNY SQUIRMED and rolled until her hands were very close to the cocoanut oil lamp on the rocky floor of the cave.

"Be careful!" Lorinda cried fearfully. "If your clothing should catch fire, nothing could save you."

Penny held her hands, which were bound behind her back, over the flame. The heat seared her flesh and made her wince with pain.

"Keep it up, Penny!" encouraged her companion. "The cord is catching fire! But the lamp is almost out!"

Penny gritted her teeth and endured the pain. Then the lamp sputtered and went out, leaving the cave to darkness.

"Oh!" wailed Lorinda in bitter disappointment.

Penny tugged at the wrist cords. Although not severed, they were half burned through and weakened. A hard jerk freed her hands.

Only a moment then was required to untie the cords

which held her feet. Next she freed Lorinda. As the girls started to leave through the passageway, Penny felt a cold blast of air upon her neck. Looking up, she was able to distinguish a small opening in the wall of the cave.

"Maybe we can get out there!" she exclaimed. "Give me a boost and I'll see!"

Lorinda lifted her up. Scrambling like a monkey, Penny secured a toe hold and crammed her head and shoulders through the opening. A moment later she ducked back to call to her friend:

"We can get out all right! But the storm is getting awful! I'll crawl out and then help you."

Scrambling through the narrow opening, Penny found herself amid the high rocks overlooking the beach. The wind was blowing in puffs, each so powerful that she nearly was dislodged from her precarious perch.

Reaching back through the hole, Penny offered her arms to Lorinda who succeeded in joining her. They huddled in the lee of an overhanging rock, rain driving into their faces.

"We must get word to the police!" Penny said breathlessly.

"And I must make certain Mother is safe!" Lorinda added. "She's been left too long alone. Antón and Celeste may have gone back there, and in that case, anything might happen!"

Slipping and sliding, the girls descended the rocks to the beach. The river, lashed by a sheet of rain, was dark and ugly. Much of the sand had been inundated and water bubbled at their heels as they ran toward the road.

A car swung toward them, its headlights blurred by the rain. It parked at the curb, and the driver tooted several times as if in signal.

"That looks like Jerry's car!" Penny cried hopefully.

It was, indeed, the reporter. He swung open the automobile door, and as they recognized him, they dashed across the road and gratefully slid into the shelter offered.

"Don't you girls know better than to be running around at a time like this?" Jerry demanded severely. "Lucky I saw you streaking up the beach!"

"What brought you here?" Penny gasped, taking several deep breaths.

"What brought me? Say, don't you realize we're in for a real storm, and it's almost here! The radio ten minutes ago reported that Oelwein, on the coast, has been completely destroyed! I knew you came here to do a little sleuthing, Penny, and I figured someone ought to look after you."

"Thanks, Jerry," she returned gratefully. "We were in trouble—plenty of it."

As the reporter drove on toward the Rhett mansion,

Penny quickly revealed what had happened. Jerry made little comment, but his expression was grim.

"Maybe Antón and Celeste are here," he said as the car reached the Rhett home. "If they are, we'll round 'em up."

Celeste and Antón, however, were not to be found in the mansion. Their rooms remained deserted and there was no indication that they had returned to the house after leaving the cave.

Lorinda lost not a moment in hastening to her mother's bedroom. To her relief, Mrs. Rhett was sleeping quietly and did not awaken.

"Thank goodness, she is safe," the girl murmured. "After what happened in the cave, I feared the worst."

"We ought to get the police on the trail of Antón and Celeste before they make their escape," Jerry urged. "Once the full force of this storm strikes, no one will be able to stir outside."

He tried the telephone but the line remained dead. "I'll drive to the police station," he decided. "Are you girls coming along?"

"I'll stay with Mother," Lorinda said. "She mustn't be left alone."

Penny hesitated, intending to remain with her friend, but Jerry seized her by the arm. "Your father sent me out here to round you up, so I'll take you to the newspaper office," he declared. "Let's go!"

As they opened the front door, rain poured in and

a great blast of wind nearly swept the pair from their feet.

"Wow!" exclaimed the reporter, holding tight to Penny as with heads lowered, they ran for the car. "This is it!"

The air was filled with flying objects, and a shingle loosened from the mansion roof, hurtled against Penny. Jerry pulled the car door open. The wind seized it, nearly wrenching it off the hinges. Gusts were of greater velocity now, with the intervals much shorter.

For a dreadful moment, Penny and Jerry thought the car would not start. The reporter jammed his foot on the starter again and again and gave it the full choke. Suddenly, the motor caught.

As they drove off along the river road, the force of the wind was so great it required all of Jerry's strength to keep the car straight on the road.

"We'll be lucky if we reach the police station!" he exclaimed. "This is a lot worse than I figured."

"Jerry!"

Seizing the reporter's arm, Penny pointed to a crouched figure visible on the road ahead. The woman, hair flying in wild streamers, clutched a large object in her arms, and was bent almost double as she sought to move against the wind.

"It's Celeste!" Penny cried.

Jerry brought the car to the roadside almost beside

the servant. Not until Penny and the reporter were out of the automobile and almost upon her, did she see them. Then with a startled cry, she turned to flee. But it was too late. Jerry seized her by the arm.

"You're coming with us!" he ordered sharply.

Battered and frightened by the force of the wind, Celeste, surprisingly, made no protest. Clutching the big Zudi drum, she allowed Jerry and Penny to pull her into the shelter of the car.

"Where is Antón?" the reporter demanded.

Celeste's answer was a shrug. She gazed toward the mansion grounds, and ignored the pair.

Jerry drove on. He glanced significantly at Penny who guessed that he intended to take Celeste directly to the police station.

However, as they approached the downtown section, the wind blew with even greater power. Not a vehicle was to be seen on the streets. The *Star* building loomed up, but the police station was six blocks away.

"We can't make it," Jerry decided. "I'm turning in here."

One of the double doors of the *Star* garage, where trucks were usually loaded with their papers, stood open. He drove inside, pulling up near the entrance to the newspaper pressroom on the ground floor.

Celeste stirred to life, and made a move to get out of the car.

"Oh, no you don't!" said Jerry, pushing her back. "You and that drum stay with us."

Celeste was of a different opinion. Glaring at Jerry, she slapped at him, and again tried to get her hand on the door handle.

"We can't hold her here," Jerry said. "But I have an idea! Penny, see if the pressroom door is unlocked."

Penny ran to test it and found it unlocked. Now that the extra was out, the pressmen had gathered in a far corner of the big room filled with giant rotary presses, to smoke and watch the storm.

Racing back to the car, Penny made her report.

"Good!" exclaimed Jerry.

With Penny's help, he got Celeste out of the car, separating her from the Zudi drum which they left in the automobile. The woman stubbornly refused to walk, so Jerry lifted her bodily and carried her kicking and struggling into the pressroom.

Near the door was a large storage closet where tools and oil for the presses were kept. Jerry shoved Celeste into this room and turned a key in the lock.

"That will hold her," he observed. "While you lock the Zudi drum in the car, I'll talk to the press foreman and tell him what we've done. Then Celeste can squawk her head off and it will do no good. We'll keep her here until the storm lets up and we can get a police squad to pick her up."

Penny ran back to the loading garage. It was deserted now save for a lone delivery truck which stood directly in front of the paper chute. Although his cargo was loaded, the driver hesitated to try to deliver until the storm abated.

Locking the car, Penny decided she would close the one big double garage door where rain was blowing in.

The hurricane now roared in full fury. Peering out into the deserted street, it seemed to Penny that no person could stand against its strength. Yet as she closed the doors, she was amazed to see a scurrying figure.

The man, his hat gone, overcoat whipped between his legs, grasped a corner of the building for support.

Seeing his face, Penny drew in her breath sharply. A small jagged scar disfigured one cheek. As he struggled past the door, she reached out and grasped his arm.

"Come in here out of the wind," she urged. As she gazed directly into his eyes, she added distinctly: "We have been looking for you a long while, Mr. Rhett!"

CHAPTER

23

IN THE PRESSROOM

"YOU HAVE made a mistake," the man mumbled. "I am not Mr. Rhett. My name is Brown—Edgar Brown."

Penny, none too certain of the identification, gazed at the man's hands. They were soft and white as if unaccustomed to hard work, but he wore no serpent ring on any of his fingers. She felt certain this was the man she had met at the steamship office.

The stranger pulled gently away from her grasp, ready to start out into the howling wind once more.

"You'll be swept off your feet if you try to battle that storm!" Penny protested. "You must stay here until the worst of it is over!"

"But I am not Mr. Rhett."

"Never mind about that," said Penny. "I mistook you for someone else. Just come inside and I'll close the doors."

The man peered outside once more, and noting the intensity of the storm, lost all desire to leave the shel-

ter. He moved away from the entrance, and Penny closed the big, heavy door.

"Come along with me into the pressroom where it is warm," she invited.

Without comment, the man followed her across the cement toward the loading docks. At the other end of the drive, someone opened the doors for a moment to allow a truck to roll inside. A great gust of wind tore through the passage, and sent the stranger's hat careening into a corner.

He darted to recapture it. As he stooped to pick it up, an object on a string which he wore about his neck, swung from beneath his sport shirt. Quickly he pushed it out of sight again, but not before Penny had seen the ring and recognized the serpent design.

"He *is* Mr. Rhett!" she thought, her pulse pounding.

Wisely, she pretended to have observed nothing, and invited him into the pressroom where Jerry was waiting. Celeste, still locked in the storage closet, was rattling the door knob and kicking on the panel with all her strength.

"Jerry," said Penny, dropping her bombshell. "This is Mr. Rhett."

The reporter's mouth dropped agape, while the stranger plainly showed his annoyance.

"I told you I am not Mr. Rhett."

"Then kindly explain the significance of that ring

you wear around your neck. I saw it only a moment ago."

The stranger became confused. "My ring—" he stammered. "Oh, that! An heirloom. I have had it for years."

"Please tell us the truth," pleaded Penny.

"I know nothing about this man you call Mr. Rhett," he replied, avoiding her direct gaze. "Evidently you have someone locked up here. Suppose you explain the meaning."

"Gladly," replied Penny. "We do have someone imprisoned in the storage room ready to turn over to the police as soon as the storm lets up. It is Celeste."

"Celeste!" The stranger's amazed expression betrayed him. Although he added: "And who is she?" it was unconvincing.

"Mr. Rhett, why pretend?" Penny demanded. "We know who you are."

"Very well," said the man, smiling faintly. "So I am Mr. Rhett! I assume you two are reporters for the *Star*."

"Right," agreed Jerry.

"And you want a story. Well, there's no story. Since you have me dead to rights as they say, I'll not deny I am Hamilton Rhett. However, my identity is my own affair. I stepped out of my old life—the bank and my home—because I was tired of a very boring existence. I never was cut to the cloth of a

banker. I dislike being shut up indoors even for an hour. Probably I shall return to South America."

"You say it is your own affair," Penny remarked pointedly. "I am afraid it isn't. Aren't you forgetting a little matter of $250,000?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"I refer to that sum in negotiable bonds which you had in your possession at the time you left the bank."

Mr. Rhett did not seem to understand for a moment. Then he exclaimed: "Oh, the bonds! I was to have returned them to the vault, but it slipped my mind. You will find them in the top desk drawer in my office."

"The desk has been carefully searched. The bonds are not there."

"Not there?" For the first time Mr. Rhett seemed disturbed. "But they must be, unless they were stolen after I went away!"

"The bonds have not been found, and the bank trustees are pressing your family to make restitution. Furthermore, your wife is dangerously ill."

"My wife sick? What is wrong?"

"The doctors do not know. However, Lorinda burned an effigy doll made in your wife's image—she found it in the house. Two burned match sticks tied together also were found by Mrs. Rhett. For some reason she became obsessed with the idea she was doomed to a lingering fatal illness. She began to re-

fuse food and since then has gone steadily downhill."

"The work of Celeste!"

"We think so. Tonight she stole the Zudi drum, and Lorinda and I found her with Antón and other followers celebrating their rites in a cave near the beach."

"Then they have reverted to their heathen ways!" the banker exclaimed. "My wife always said Celeste hated her, but I, like a blind fool, refused to see it. Once during the years I spent in the jungle, Celeste saved my life and I always felt grateful to her. Now I must forget that, for she is a dangerous woman if she seeks to practice her jungle magic."

"You don't actually believe Celeste could make your wife ill merely by suggestion?" Jerry inquired in amazement.

"In the jungles I have seen a native die from superficial wounds. If told the spear which struck him had been sung over by an enemy, the native would simply lie down, refuse food and pine away. My wife is in great danger!"

"Can nothing be done?" cried Penny.

Mr. Rhett's face tightened into hard, grim lines. "A great deal can be done," he said. "But Celeste must be fought with her own jungle weapons. To turn her over to the police will not be sufficient. She is inside the closet you say—let me talk to her."

"Okay," agreed Jerry, "but Celeste in her present mood is a pretty brisk customer. To make sure she doesn't get away, I'll lock the pressroom door before letting her out of her cage."

As the reporter went to the exit, Penny heard the pressmen at the other end of the room shout that the storm had abated.

"The hurricane has not passed," corrected Mr. Rhett quietly. "This lull merely marks the end of the first phase. The wind will return harder than ever in a few minutes from another quarter."

Jerry returned, and taking the key to the storage room from his pocket, cautiously unlocked the door. Celeste, blinking like an owl as she staggered out under the electric lights, gasped as she saw Mr. Rhett.

"Master!" she exclaimed worshipfully. "You come back!"

Mr. Rhett's face showed no trace of the affection he had felt for his servant. "Celeste," he said, "you've been dabbling in magic again! What's this nonsense about my wife being ill and going to die?"

"The truth, Master. Antón and I try hard to save her, but no use. She die next month. Maybe sooner."

"Get this through your head, Celeste. My wife will not die. She will be as well as you are within two days. All your incantations over the doll were wasted. You plotted to no avail. I am home now,

and if you persist in your wickedness, I will meet your so-called magic with stronger magic of my own!"

"Celeste sorry," the old woman whimpered. "Do it only to get money for master."

"I need no money and want none. You have been very wicked, Celeste, and must be turned over to the police for safe keeping."

"Oh, no, Master! Not the police!"

"Yes, and now is the time to take you there during this lull in the storm."

Celeste's wild eyes darted about the room, searching for a means of escape. With a savage lunge, she reached the door only to find it locked.

As Jerry and Mr. Rhett bore down upon her, she scurried frantically along the outer room wall, coming to the metal paper chute through which packages of freshly-printed papers were tossed for delivery.

Quick as a cat, Celeste scrambled into the chute, crawling through on all fours. At the chute's exit on the sheltered cement drive, stood the waiting paper truck, its rear door ajar. Already loaded, the driver awaited only this lull in the storm before setting off to deliver his cargo.

Even as Celeste crawled through the chute, the man started the truck engine. The woman did not hesitate. Leaping into the rear of the vehicle, she slammed the door.

Hearing it close, the driver assumed another workman had shut it as a signal for him to pull out. Shifting gears, he drove away with his cargo of papers—and Celeste.

CHAPTER

24

THE GRINNING GARGOYLE

BY THE time Jerry, Penny and Mr. Rhett unlocked the pressroom door and reached the loading dock, the truck bearing Celeste was far down the street.

"Hey, where'd that truck go?" the reporter shouted to another workman at the far end of the drive.

"Docks at the end of Basset Street," he answered. "A batch o' papers go aboard the *Monclove* for shipment to Presque Isle."

Jerry's car stood close by. He sprang in, making room for Penny and Mr. Rhett.

The newspaper truck had disappeared by the time they drove out on the street. Jerry took a short-cut route to the Basset Street docks. Signs and debris of all description cluttered the roadway. Rain had ceased, but the ominous quiet, the heaviness of the air, was even more frightening than the wind had been.

In a distant section of the city they heard the high-pitched whistle of a police siren; otherwise, the streets were as silent as the tomb.

The car turned a corner, and directly ahead Penny glimpsed the newspaper truck.

"There it is!" she cried, but Jerry also had seen the vehicle.

He put on speed, and was close behind as the truck pulled up with a jerk at Dock 12. Green water whipped to foam, crashed with heavy impact against the dock posts and flooded out on the slippery planking.

"We won't have much time!" Mr. Rhett exclaimed. "When the next phase of the storm comes—and it's close now—the wind will be terrific!"

The men, with Penny close behind, leaped from the car. Quick as they were, Celeste was out of the truck before they could reach its door.

She stopped short as she saw the trio, then like a trapped animal, turned and fled in the opposite direction.

"Celeste!" Mr. Rhett shouted. "Wait!"

The woman paid no attention. Splashing ankle-deep through water that washed the dock planks, she ran precariously close to the river's edge.

A hoarse shout from behind caused Penny to turn. The driver of the truck was gesturing and pointing first to the dark sky and then to an open shed. For a moment she did not understand, but as he ran for the shelter, she heard the deep-throated roar of the hurricane as it returned for its final onslaught.

"Quick!" cried Mr. Rhett who also recognized the danger. "Inside!"

The three ran back to the shed where the truck-driver had taken shelter. Although they shouted again and again to Celeste, she ignored their warnings.

As the wind struck, they saw her at the very edge of the dock. She half turned toward the shed as if debating whether or not to seek its shelter, then took a step or two in the opposite direction.

A great gust lifted off a section of the shed roof and whirled it away. As the full impact of the wind swept around the building, Celeste clung to a dock post for an instant; then her fingers lost their grip, and with a scream, she toppled over the edge into the churning water.

Jerry started toward the door, but Mr. Rhett seized his arm, dragging him back.

"Don't be a fool! Celeste is beyond help! You'll only lose your own life if you venture out there now!"

Already Celeste had disappeared beneath the turbulent waters, leaving no trace. Anxiously those in the shed watched but her head never appeared above the surface.

"Poor Celeste," said Mr. Rhett sadly. "She meant well, but she was superstitious and misguided. However, she would have pined away in captivity. Perhaps she went the best way."

The servant's startling death placed a pall upon the

four who huddled in the shed. Close together, they flattened themselves against the wall, expecting at any moment that the entire building would be lifted from its foundation and hurled into the river. The force of the wind was almost unbelievable.

After nearly a half hour, the gusts lost their strength and Mr. Rhett declared that the greatest danger had been passed.

"Tell me everything that happened while I was away," he requested Penny and Jerry.

"We will," promised Penny, "but first, suppose you explain why you went away."

"I thought I did tell you." Mr. Rhett drew a deep sigh. "For many months I considered retiring from the bank. I discussed it with my wife, but she failed to see my viewpoint and insisted that I remain. We became deadlocked, so to speak.

"I tried for her sake to force myself to like bank work, but it was utterly impossible. Each day I found myself longing for the old carefree adventurous days."

"So you quietly walked out?" Jerry supplied.

"Something like that. My actions weren't premeditated. One thing led to another. I had a quarrel with my wife over neglect of bank duties. As I sat thinking it over at my desk, it struck me that Lorinda and her mother probably would be happier if I removed myself from the picture."

"Did you write anything as you sat there?" Penny interposed eagerly.

"I'm not sure I know what you mean."

"Did you draw a picture of a plumed serpent?"

"Yes, I believe so, though it was only absent-minded doodling."

"And beneath the drawing you wrote, 'This shall be the end.' "

"Why, yes, I did," the man acknowledged. "I had decided to walk out and those words expressed the conclusion I reached. I wrote the thought absent-mindedly and never intended it to fall into anyone's hands. Did I leave the paper in the desk?"

"The police found it there."

"I must have been quite upset," Mr. Rhett said, frowning. "At any rate, I walked out with less than three dollars in my pocket, and didn't realize until later that I was without funds."

"So you took lodging in a cheap flop house on Cherry Street?" Jerry interposed.

"Yes, you seem to have followed my actions very closely. Although the lodgings were hardly deluxe, I did not mind the experience. I frequently have slept on the ground or in native huts."

"You stayed there only one night?" Penny inquired.

"Another lodger told me two persons had come to ask questions about a man who wore a serpent ring," Mr. Rhett said. "Not wishing to be found, I removed

the ring from my finger, and found another lodging place. When my money ran out, I picked up a little work as a laborer at one of the mills."

"I saw you inquiring at one of the steamship ticket offices," Penny reminded him. "You remember that, I'm sure."

"I sought to work my passage on a boat going to South America," Mr. Rhett explained.

"All this time, didn't you read the newspapers?" Jerry asked curiously. "Didn't you know the bonds were missing and that your wife was ill?"

Mr. Rhett shook his head. "I purposely avoided looking at the newspapers. I was afraid if I did I might be tempted to return to my old life."

"And now?" asked Penny softly.

"I have no future, only the present. Before making any plans, I must return home to see that my wife frees her mind from Celeste's evil suggestions. I made a great mistake in bringing Celeste and Antón into the household. But once my wife knows Celeste is dead, I am confident she will quickly recover."

"You still love your wife?"

"I shall always love her," he returned quietly, "but she has no use for me. I've been a drag on her since the day we were married."

"She doesn't feel that way, I'm sure," Penny corrected. "Since you went away, she's been heartbroken. Lorinda needs you too."

"I can never return to the bank," Mr. Rhett repeated. "And there are the stolen bonds to be considered. Why, the police may even arrest me! I'm all mixed up."

"Matters will straighten out as soon as you see your wife," Penny declared. "However, I'll admit recovering the bonds may not be so easy. To my knowledge, the police haven't a single clue."

Jerry was peering out the open shed door. "The storm is letting up," he called. "We'll soon be able to get out of here."

Another half hour and the wind died sufficiently so that the party could safely leave the shelter. The truck driver returned to the newspaper office, while Jerry and Penny drove Mr. Rhett to his home.

The mansion yard was cluttered with uprooted trees, boards and debris. Penny ran down the path a short distance and returned to report that the thatched roof cottage had vanished without a trace.

"Perhaps it is just as well," said Mr. Rhett. "It was a mistake to build the cottage, but Celeste first put the idea in my head. I intended to use it only as a trophy room, but to Celeste it became a living symbol of the life she had left behind."

"Why did you build the passageway leading to the cave and to Celeste's room?" Penny inquired.

Mr. Rhett's blank expression told her that he did not understand. After she had explained, he said

grimly: "Antón and Celeste must have dug the tunnel without my knowledge! Oh, they were a cunning pair!"

"And Antón still is on the loose," Jerry reminded the banker. "We'll have to notify the police to pick him up."

Mr. Rhett and the young people entered the house. Lorinda, startled by hearing the front door open, ran to the head of the stairway. Seeing her stepfather, she gave a cry of joy and raced to meet him.

"You've come back! Oh, Mother needs you so badly. Do go to her at once."

Mr. Rhett needed no urging. He was up the steps two at a time. Jerry and Penny, not wishing to intrude, remained in the living room, but a few minutes later, Lorinda called them.

"Oh, everything is wonderful!" she exclaimed. "Mother and Father have adjusted all their differences. And best of all, she's already half over the idea she is going to die. Why, he just told her Celeste was dead and that she could never do any further harm. Mother snapped right out of it!"

Lorinda insisted that Jerry and Penny go upstairs. Mrs. Rhett was sitting up in bed, and her eyes were shining.

"How silly I've been," she declared. "As I look back, I realize Celeste hated me and kept putting ideas in my mind. Why, I feel much better already."

"Hungry?" asked Lorinda.

"Indeed, I am. I must have a gigantic dinner tonight." Mrs. Rhett laughed and added: "With everything well salted!"

"About the bank—" began Mr. Rhett.

"Let's not talk about it now," his wife pleaded. "I was wrong about that too. I'll never ask you to go back there, for it isn't your type of life. Instead, perhaps we can go away somewhere on a long trip—South America, would that appeal to you, Hamilton?"

"Would it?" he chuckled. "Someone has been putting ideas in your head, and this time it wasn't Celeste!"

Anxious to return to the newspaper office and to stop at the police station, Jerry and Penny soon took leave of the Rhetts, after receiving urgent invitations to return later that night.

"Well, it appears everything is turning out hunkey dorey for the Rhetts," Jerry observed as he and Penny drove away from the mansion. "Antón is certain to be caught by the police, and those followers of his will be jailed too if they ever show their faces again."

"Everything *might* be fine for the Rhetts except for one thing," Penny returned. "Mrs. Rhett doesn't have much ready cash available, and there still remains a little matter of $250,000 in missing bonds."

"I'd forgotten about that. You're right, Rhett still is in an awkward spot."

The car drove into the downtown section where a few vehicles now were moving. Under the glow of the street lights, workmen were clearing the debris away.

As the car approached the First National Bank, Penny chanced to raise her eyes toward the second story balcony fronting the street. The grinning gargoyles stood out in dark relief, and as she gazed at them, she suddenly saw a shadowy figure moving stealthily toward the one nearest the open door leading from Mr. Rhett's private office.

"Why, that looks like Albert Potts!" she exclaimed.

As she watched in amazement, the man approached the gargoyle. Reaching his hand far in between the open jaws, he removed something which he thrust into his overcoat pocket. Then, with a nervous glance down upon the deserted street, he stepped back into Mr. Rhett's office, and closed the door.

CHAPTER

25

ON THE BALCONY

"JERRY, THAT was Albert Potts on the balcony!" Penny cried excitedly. "I'm sure I saw him remove an object from inside the gargoyle!"

"Maybe he was just looking to see what damage was done by the storm," commented the reporter.

"He took something out and put it in his overcoat pocket! Jerry, now that I think back, Potts acted queerly that first day when the police investigated Mr. Rhett's office. He didn't want anyone to go near the gargoyle! Another thing, he's been spending money as if it were rainwater!"

"You're suggesting—"

"That it was Albert Potts who stole the bonds! Weren't they left in Mr. Rhett's desk? Potts knew it and had a perfect chance to take them! He implied that Rhett walked off with them! Actually, he hid the bonds in the gargoyle, knowing that if they were found there, no blame would be likely to fall upon him. Whenever he needed money, he cashed a bond

—that's why only a few have shown up at out of town banks!"

"Say, maybe you have something!" exclaimed Jerry, pulling up at the curb. "If he had hid the bonds in the gargoyle, it would be natural for him to wonder if they still were safe after this storm! He might have decided to shift them to another place."

"My idea exactly! Jerry, let's nab him and turn him over to the police!"

"Not quite so fast, my little chickadee. If we accuse Potts, and it turns out we're wrong, well, he could make it hot for us."

"We'll have to take a chance," Penny urged.

Leaving the car at the curb, the pair walked hurriedly to the bank. The building was dark and the lights were off inside.

"Sure you saw Potts on the balcony?" Jerry asked as they huddled against the wall for protection against the biting wind.

"Yes, and I think he's coming now!"

Penny was correct. They heard footsteps coming down the marble stairway, and a moment later, the bank secretary unlocked the door. The waiting couple made no move until he had locked himself out, but as he started away, Jerry tapped him on the shoulder.

Potts whirled around, obviously startled. His face blanched.

"Hello, Potts," said Jerry. "Working late, aren't you?"

"Why, yes," stammered the man, edging away.

"Can you spare a match?"

Potts half reached into his pocket as if to proffer one, then said testily: "I haven't any. Sorry."

"Sure now, you must have a match," said Jerry, brushing against him. "Maybe in your overcoat pocket."

Before Potts could prevent it, he had thrust his hands deep into each of the outside pockets. The bank clerk jerked angrily away. However, it was too late. Jerry triumphantly brought to light a heavy manila envelope.

"Give that to me!" Potts cried furiously.

Sidestepping him, Jerry pulled several bonds of large denomination from the envelope.

"The stolen bonds!" exclaimed Penny. "Mr. Potts, whatever possessed you to do it?"

The bank secretary never answered the question. Instead, he wheeled and started at a run down the street. As he reached the corner, a policeman who had just finished making a report to headquarters, turned from his phone box.

"Stop that man!" yelled Jerry.

The policeman grasped Potts, bringing him up short. After that, the bank secretary did his explaining to the desk sergeant at police headquarters. So

unconvincing was his story, that he was immediately locked in a cell.

Meanwhile, Jerry and Penny related all they knew about the case. All scout cars were ordered to be on the alert to pick up Antón. Mr. Rhett was brought to the station within the hour, and promptly identified the recovered bonds as those he had left in his office desk.

At first, Potts firmly maintained his innocence, but after police had subjected him to a lie detector test, he realized his case was lost. When one of the detectives who was questioning him, remarked that his wife likely would be implicated in the theft, Potts broke completely:

"No! No! My wife had nothing to do with it," he insisted. "I wanted to give my family better things—that was why I took the bonds. I thought Mr. Rhett would never return and that he would be blamed for the theft."

"How did you cash the bonds?" he was asked.

"I was afraid to take them to a bank myself," Potts confessed. "Instead, I paid a woman in another town to do it for me. But she did it only as a favor, and had no idea the bonds were stolen. I alone am to blame."

A check by police revealed that Potts had spent only $2,000 of the total amount stolen. Mr. Rhett declared that this sum easily could be made up, so

that the bank would sustain no loss. He was inclined to be lenient with his secretary, but police were insistent that the man be brought to trial.

Jerry and Penny, knowing that they had a big story to write, did not tarry long at the police station. However, the police desk sergeant promised to keep them informed of any new developments in the case. True to his word, he called them soon after they reached the *Star* office. His news was that Antón had been captured by the police and now was safely locked in a jail cell.

"Well, that rings the gong on the case," Jerry announced as he hung up the telephone. "Thanks to you, Penny, it's all wound up."

"And it's nearly edition time!" barked the city editor. "Let's get going on that story."

He looked at Jerry who was known as the best writer on the paper, and then his eyes moved on to Penny who waited with bated breath.

"This was her story from start to finish," said Jerry as the editor hesitated.

"Get going!" ordered the editor again, and now he looked straight at Penny. "Give it to me in takes."

Penny hurried to a typewriter. The lead, telling of Mr. Rhett's return, Potts' arrest and recovery of the stolen bonds, almost wrote itself. Keeping her own part and Jerry's entirely out of the story, she wrote smoothly and with speed.

When she had finished half a page, she called: "Copy boy!" and ripping the sheet of paper from the typewriter gave it to him to carry to the editor's desk.

With a fresh sheet in the machine, she wrote on until she had a second "take" ready. Again she called the copy boy and, as he snatched it from her hand, rolled still another sheet into the typewriter.

At last she was on the final page and glanced over it before she typed "30" at the end. The story had been well told, written tersely in the manner DeWitt liked. With a feeling of exultation, she realized she had done a good job.

Getting to her feet, she dropped the last page into the copy basket. Earlier sheets already had been copy-read and were in the process of being set into type. Any moment now, the edition would roll and papers would be on the street.

Penny turned from the desk to see Jerry sitting with his feet propped up on one of the tables. He was gazing at her quizzically and grinning.

"Well, you did it again, Penny!" he remarked.

"We did it together," she corrected.

"With the help of our silent partner," he added lightly.

"Silent partner?"

"The hurricane. It damaged a lot of Riverview property, but on the other side of the ledger, it helped write '30' to the Rhett case."

Penny nodded as she reached for her hat and raincoat. Just then, a copy boy ran up.

"Telephone for you," he said. "It's your housekeeper, Mrs. Weems. She wants to know if you're safe."

"Safe and sound and on my way home," laughed Penny. "Tell her I've already started."

"And that she's being driven by her faithful chauffeur," chuckled Jerry, as he reached for his hat. "Which reminds me, we have a little package to deliver to the Rhetts'."

"The Zudi drum! I forgot all about it!"

"Haven't you forgotten another important matter too?" teased Jerry, escorting her through the swinging gate. "Me, for instance."

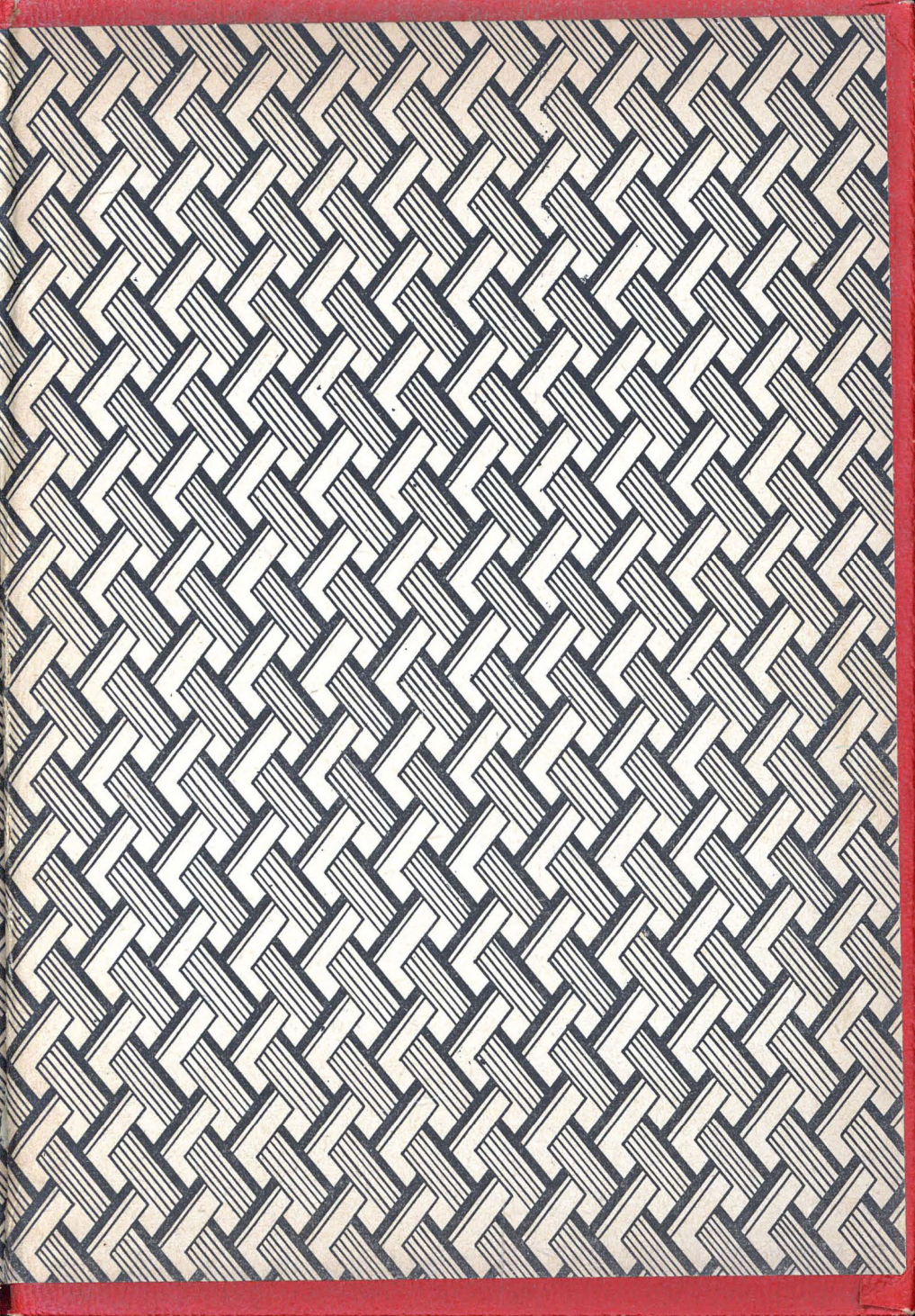
"You?"

"My reward for tonight's work. Girl reporters, even cute little numbers like you, can't snatch my bylines without paying the piper!"

"And what fee do you require?" Penny asked with pretended innocence.

"We'll go into that later," he chuckled, pinning her neatly into a shadowy corner of the vestibule. "Just now, I'll take a little kiss on deposit!"

THE END



Whispering Walls

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